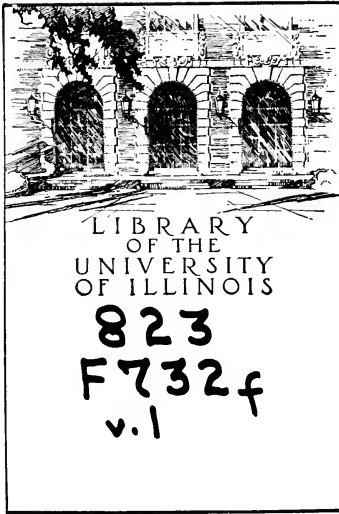


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A FAMILY TREE.

BY

ALBANY DE FONBLANQUE,

AUTHOR OF "THE TANGLED SKEIN," "CUT ADRIPT,"
ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



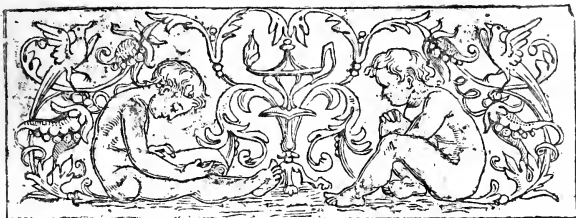
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A FAMILY TREE.

BOOK I.


THE ROOTS OF IT.





CHAPTER I.

HOW MARTHA DENYS WAS TRIED FOR WITCHCRAFT.

 HE roots of it go down two hundred and sixty-four years, into what are sometimes called "the good old times." An old Queen, who had reigned like a king—and a bold one—was not long dead; and a middle-aged king, who was no better than an old woman, governed merrie England in her stead. But he was a learned prince, and a cunning. He could talk you Latin by

the hour. He would have made an excellent President of a School Board if there had been such things in his time. About the period whereof I write he gave up his mind to put down the smoking of tobacco, and to eradicate the curse of witchcraft from his dominions.

Alas ! And were there witches in those “good old times ?” The learned king said so. Infallibility at Rome said so. Parliament said so. The Glorious Reformation had nothing to say to the contrary. There were witches in good sooth—dreadful creatures, who sold themselves to the devil, and worshipped him, under the form of a goat, at their unholy sabbaths. They flew about on broomsticks smeared with the fat of unbaptised infants. They afflicted man and beast with diseases, blighted crops, spoiled milk in the churn, and beer in the vat ; changed themselves, upon occasions, into rats, and cats, and

bats, and toads, and committed other enormities too numerous to detail. One of them, finding the orthodox conveyance inconvenient, (perhaps it was not up to her weight) used to change her daughter into a pony, and have her shod by the —— ; well, I don't like to repeat the bad word, so will say by the *goat*, who appears to have not been a skilled farrier, as the poor girl's hands and feet were maimed. Another old lady, and her daughter aged nine, sold themselves as aforesaid, and raised a fearful storm by pulling off their stockings, and making a lather of soap—proceedings which in these godless days would suggest nothing more reprehensible than a family wash ; but they knew better in the “good old times,” and hanged the pair for witchcraft. In Germany, from first to last, one hundred thousand criminals expiated their crimes on the scaffold ; and in merrie England we disposed of

about thirty thousand before we were done with them. Learned judges, grave men who gave body, bone, and brain to the Common Law of England ; jurists, whose names are household words in the Temple and Lincoln's Inn ; writers, whose text books are quoted now with respect in our highest courts of justice—sat and judged these wretches, and solemnly took note of the stocking-pulling, sud making, and demoniacal shoeing evidence brought against them, they pretending all the while to be only poor ugly old women, and the *goat* having the meanness never to interfere in their favour.

Perhaps the strangest thing of all was, that many of them confessed their crimes. Writing whilst on circuit as a judge of assize in the year 1682, Lord North relates, “ Here have been 3 old women condemned for witchcraft * * * they were the most old, decrepid, despicable, miserable

creatures that he (the judge who tried them) ever saw. A painter would have chosen them out of the whole country for figures of that kind to have drawn by. The evidence against them was very full and fancifull, but their own confessions exceeded it—they appeared not only weary of their lives, but to have a great deal of skill to convict themselves; their description of the sucking devils with sawcer eyes was so naturall, that the jury could not choose but beleeve them.”

The old lady who made the storm out of soap-suds confessed to being a witch, and so did her demoniacal sister who had her daughter so badly shod. She was so idiotic — says the chronicler — that she clapped her withered old hands with glee at the sight of the fire which was to burn her.

This befel in Scotland in the year 1722, more than a century after the time when my story opens. It opens soon after

the wise king aforesaid had published his "Dæmonologie," and Parliament had enacted this law: "If any person shall use an invocation or conjuration of any evil or wicked spirit—shall entertain, employ, feed, or reward any evil or cursed spirit—take up any dead body to employ in witchcraft, sorcery, or enchantment, or shall practise, or shall exercise any sort of sorcery, &c., whereby any person shall be killed, wasted, consumed, or lamed," shall suffer death. The wise king caused a whole assize to be prosecuted because a reputed witch was acquitted!

So you see there must have been witches, and as the race has died out, let us bless the Providence which made our forefathers so wisely severe, so scientific, and so acute.

But do not let us be puffed up with self-conceit. There were wise men in other countries. A horse was tried at Lisbon, in 1601, and found guilty of being pos-

sessed by the devil. It was weakly urged that his mundane master had taught him many tricks; perhaps he ran round the ring as that master indicated by motion of whip, picked up pocket-handkerchiefs, fired pistols, wheeled round and round with his front feet on a chair, and performed other accursed and demoniacal evolutions. Tricks, quotha! Was the Holy Office—was Infallibility to be taken in by *tricks*? They burned that horse to death.

* * * *

There were so many witches in the year of grace 1610, and honest people were so afraid of them, that clever men, upon whom a portion of the king's wisdom was shed, arose, and were commissioned to detect them and their ways.

In the northern countries (especially in Lancashire) the curse of witchcraft was felt direfully, and consequently there was no lack of official witch-finders. Perhaps,

writing in a better age, I should say that there were many official witch-finders, and consequently no lack of witches. People must live !

Be this as it may, it is certain that the good town of Manchester was grievously afflicted in divers ways, and the reeve and the rector agreed that witchcraft was at the bottom of the troubles. In the first place the Medlock and the Irwell had risen higher than the oldest inhabitant had known those rivers to rise, and they had flooded some parts of the town. In the country about, sheep and oxen died ; and a fever broke out when the waters subsided. Who could have done all this but the witches ?

So said Master Willford, a noted witchfinder. He came to town specially retained, and there was no hiding the truth from him. In less than a week he discovered the culprit, and had her down to

the river, opposite where the old church stands, to "try" her.

There were various ways of "trying" witches known in these "good old times." One was the trial by water. You tied the thumbs of the suspected person together, and flung her into the stream where it was deepest. If she floated, she was a witch; if she did not, she was drowned! There was an end of her, any way. The trial by water was favoured by Master Willford, as being the most conclusive. The old woman upon whom his suspicions fell was duly tied, hoven into the water, and floated like cork!

"A witch! a witch!" cried the mob.
"Death to the witch!"

And they would have stoned her to death as she floated; but the witch-finder, calm and proud of his success, bade them drag her to the bank, and spare her for her legal doom.

"She will not drown, my friends," he said, as they hauled her in ; "but, in good sooth, she will burn !"

"To the fire with her then ! to the fire !" shouted the infuriated crowd. There was not one there who had not suffered in some way by the flood or the fever.

"Softly, softly, my masters," said Willford. It was his first case amongst them, and he wanted to show more of his wisdom. "Softly ; let us be *sure*. There be other tests. Ha ! what have we here ?"

The supposed witch had struggled so vigorously against her trial, that it had become necessary to tie her legs as well as her thumbs ; and in the operation, the upper part of her dress had been torn off her back, and left exposed a pair of withered shoulders, upon one of which the eagle eye of Master Willford detected a mole—a black mole, with three grey hairs in it—as she lay fainting on the bank.

“What think you of *this*?” he cried, in triumph. “Let us praise the Lord, for He has delivered the wicked into our hand. Hark ye, my friends! Wherever the devil kisseth a witch, there springeth a mark like unto this.”

“It is a mole,” said the nearest bystander.

“Thou art a good man, Master Symes,” said the witch-finder, with a sigh, “and knoweth not the iniquity of these creatures. I tell thee it is the devil’s mark. Now, look you; when I strike my bodkin into the accursed spot——”

But before he could strike, the mob was divided, and he sent rolling almost into the river, by a tall man in a riding-dress, who led a handsome chestnut horse (from which he had just dismounted) by the bridle.

“What savagery is this?” asked the new comer, sternly.

"A witch! a witch, Master Hugh!" cried a dozen voices.

"'Tis she who brought the flood!"

"She bewitched my good man!"

"She lamed my sheep, curse her!"

"She gave my little Jack the fever!"

"Death to the witch!"

And a storm of other accusations and threats rose from the excited crowd.

"Stand back!" cried the horsemen. "So, ho, Hafid!" (this to his horse). "Who proves she is a witch?"

"I do," replied Willford, pale and trembling with anger. "Have a care. I am not without authority."

"Nor I either, sir. I am a justice of peace, as all here know. Again I ask who proves her a witch?"

"She floated. Did not she float, my friends?" replied Willford, appealing to the crowd.

"Aye, aye, 'tis true! She floated,

Master Hugh," said the man who had been addressed as Symes, with a grave shake of his bald head.

"And so wouldst thou have done, if thou hadst worn her coats. Why, gossip," expostulated Master Hugh, "what means all this? A reasonable man like thee talking thus! Floated, quotha! Didst thou not mark that her coats, tied at the knee, were full of air, and bulged out like a piper's wind-bag? Floated! I' faith, it would have been more like witchcraft if she had sunk!"

"There be other proofs," cried Willford, eagerly. "Will ye that I put her to the other proofs?" This to the crowd.

"Aye, aye!" they shouted, with a rush and a roar, which was too much for "Hafid's" equanimity. He gave a swirl to the right, and then to the left, describing a semicircle, of which his master was the centre; and having gotten his hoofs well

charged with gravel and small stones, let fly.

The horse that was burned at Lisbon for witchcraft could not have done his master's work more scientifically ; but " Hafid " is not bewitched—only high-spirited. He does not like to have strange people fussing round within reach of his heels ; and after his first volley, they do not do so. They retire out of range, and mutter—

" Let her be put to other proof."

" Thou wast about to strike thy bodkin into her flesh ?" said Master Hugh, addressing the witch-finder.

" Into Satan's mark," he cried ; " Satan's own mark, my friends ! I appeal to thee, whom she has bewitched. Who is this man, that he should withstand me, when I have the warrant of his worship the reeve ?"

" Were he fifty times the reeve he could not warrant the torture of the humblest of

his majesty's lieges," said Hugh Desmond, lifting his hat. "Who is this stranger?"

"'Tis no stranger; 'tis Master Willford, the witch-finder," replied Symes, in a solemn whisper. "Pry'thee, Master Hugh, withstand him not. 'Tis true as he says. He hath the reeve's license. Be silent, lest it be taken ill of thee. The woman is surely a witch."

"If she be, let her suffer; but not without proof," replied the rider aloud. "Ha! thy famous bodkin! If thou dost thrust it into this mark, Master Willford—if that be thy name—and she be verily a witch, what will befall?"

"She will call on the name of her master who made it," said Willford.

"Is there aught strange in thy bodkin? Any charm? May one see it?" asked Master Hugh.

"Charm! Thanks be to God, there is none. The Truth—the sound *Truth*, my

friends, is the only charm I know. Take the bodkin in thy hand, and strike thyself."

Master Hugh received the instrument—a large and sharp gold pin—and knelt down close to the assumed witch; but instead of thrusting it into her shoulder, he pretended to slip, and sent it up to the head in the leg of the witch-finder, who incontinently shrieked out—

"THE DEVIL!"

"Why, look you, now," said his tormentor, "how deceitful are these so-called *proofs*! Did we not know Master Willford for an honest man, he would stand confessed a wizard! You heard what he cried?"

"'Twas not struck into a devil's mark," growled the witch-finder, rubbing his bleeding calf.

"A fico for your devil's marks! 'Tis but a mole. Thou hast one on thy cheek, sweetheart," Hugh added, turning to a

pretty woman who stood near. "I would fain be the Prince of Darkness for awhile if I might kiss so fair a piece of flesh."

At this sally the crowd laughed—a good sign, for when a crowd laughs it is no longer dangerous.

Master Hugh knew well how to take advantage of the turn of the tide. He treated the witch-finder and his expostulations with ridicule. He rated the men, and laughed at the women; and in a few minutes the latter, who had been most violent against the witch, vied with each other in restoring the poor wretch to consciousness.

"'Tis true," they said to each other. "Master Hugh is right. There was air in her coats. 'Twas but natural that she should float. Poor old dame! Who is she? Does any one know her?"

No one knew her. She had only lately come to live in the town with her son, who

was an armourer. It was rather a good thing for Master Willford that, wise under defeat, he had beaten a retreat before this young giant came upon the scene, with his ten-pound hammer in his hand.

Besides being a most inoffensive person, old Martha Denys, the reputed witch, was a devout Roman Catholic. This did not change the views of Master Willford, who was of the Reformed faith; but the old religion was strong just then in Manchester, and many came forward to vouch for the piety of the accused now that she was safe; so Willford thought it best to retire from the prosecution as gracefully as he could—but he did so with a vow of vengeance against the man who had so misused his bodkin.

Hugh Desmond was not so far in advance of his age as to deny the power of witches. What wrote Mr. Justice Blackstone, whose “Commentaries” are still a

legal text-book. "To deny," he says, "the possibility, nay, actual existence of witchcraft and sorcery, is at once flatly to contradict the revealed word of God in various passages, both of the Old and New Testament; and the thing itself is a truth to which every nation in the world has in its turn borne testimony, either by examples seemingly well-attested, or by prohibitory laws, which at least suppose the possibility of a commerce with evil spirits."

Lord North's letter, already quoted from, concludes—

"Sir, I find the country so fully possessed against them" (the three old women left for execution as witches) "that, although some of the virtuosi may think these" (the confessions) "the effect of confederacy, melancholy, or delusion, and that young folks are altogether as quick-sighted as those who are old and infirm, yet we cannot reprieve them without appearing to

denye the very being of witches, which, as it is contrary to law, so I think it would be ill for his majesty's service, for it may give the faction occasion to set afoot the old trade of witch-finding, that cost many innocent persons their lives, which the justice will prevent."

Hugh Desmond was not wiser in his generation than were North and Blackstone in theirs. Moreover, in his time, the trade of witch-finding was in full swing. He had an idea that the rains could have caused the flood, and the flood the fever; without the aid of witchcraft in this particular case. But that was no reason why witches should not have been, and be thereafter, the sole cause of disaster in others.

He admitted that malign influences might be invoked, but objected to throwing old women into the river, and pricking them with bodkins as a means of discovering by whom such spells were exercised. He in-

terposed between Master Willford and his victim out of pure humanity and love of justice, and was very glad to find afterwards that old Martha was the mother of the young smith whom he had just taken into his service. But there were those who shook their heads when this fact was brought out.

In his youth Hugh Desmond had been what we call "wild." He ran away to sea, fought the Turks for the Venetian Republic, and did some buccaneering on the Spanish main afterwards on his own account. His hot blood calmed a little, he returned to Europe, wandered about in strange countries, and picked up strange knowledge and occupations, which caused some scandal to the good folks of Manchester, when at last he came back to take his father's place amongst them.

He was a fourth son when he ran away, and was not much missed ; but one by one

his brothers died, and the old man was left with no kindred hand to close his eyes, or heir to inherit his well-won wealth. Master Hugh had not been heard of for twenty years, and yet he turned up at the funeral of his last surviving brother, and showed no surprise when told that the others were dead. How was that ?

As long as his father lived—it was only for a year—the worst that could be said of Hugh was that nothing would induce him to become a merchant, that he was restless and at times morose, that he swore Spanish and Italian oaths, and rode off alone and stayed away for weeks together on no apparent errand. Still he was not unpopular. He excelled in feats of strength, had a free, rollicking way with women, and a rough-and-ready manner of doing justice and seeing justice done to the poor, which gained him many friends—and some enemies.

How came it that a man who had passed

more than half his life abroad should know so much about the rights of Englishmen, that he could beard the reeve himself? This was another mystery.

Within a month of the death of the old merchant, his father, he opened a huge coffer, which had been forwarded after him from Italy, took out many strange, and, to his wondering domestics, unrighteous implements, and set up a forge in an old building once used as a brewhouse, where he began to spend his days and nights, forging iron beams, and cranks and springs, and poring over great moth-eaten books. A man of his wealth, who might be reeve, as his father had been, turning blacksmith! The gossips could not understand it, and laid it down at first to the pernicious effects of going abroad. The time came when they took a graver view. This was why Master Symes was anxious to prevent him from helping the reputed witch.

He was now about thirty years of age, strong, but well-formed, with clear grey eyes, and a touch of sadness in them. Short chestnut hair curled naturally round a broad and massive forehead, and a well-trimmed beard of the same rich hue hid the lower portion of his face.

He was a handsome man, this Hugh Desmond, and you could not be half an hour in his company without discovering that he was one with whom it would be dangerous to trifle. Many knew him as kind and generous. Women and children took to him at once. They saw nothing stern in his eye. With the men he was not so popular, as a rule. Truth to tell, he carried too many guns (intellectually) for the majority of his acquaintances. They were rather afraid of him, though amongst themselves they ridiculed his various accomplishments, as jealous people will do.

There was nothing unholy in his cranks

and bars, or in the big black books he studied. He had simply become bitten whilst in Florence with that art which was to mechanics, what astrology was to astronomy, and alchemy to chemistry. He was bent upon discovering perpetual motion, and pursued his experiments in the manner and with the ceremonies which the enthusiasts or charlatans, under whom he had studied, exacted.

According to the science of those days, a wheel for the machine which was to move of itself, and never cease moving, was not only to be made of a certain size and weight, but to be commenced at given combinations of heavenly bodies, and many ingredients utterly unknown to Messrs. Whitworth, or Penn, had to be mixed with the metal.

In the intervals of his great work, Master Hugh employed himself upon a much more profitable labour. One of his masters—a

pupil of the great Cellini—had given him three keys made by the very hands of that famous man, and each haft was a work of art worthy of its designer. The first was in the shape of an anchor, entwined with sea-weed; the second, of a cross, entwined with ivy; the third, of a heart, entwined with forget-me-nots. HOPE, FAITH, and CHARITY. The first was iron, the second silver, the third gold. To what caskets they belonged, or if indeed they had belonged to any, was not known. Hugh Desmond determined to make one for them.

A strong hand, a correct eye, and a vivid imagination untrammelled by rule, produced what was at least a curiosity—in parts really beautiful, as a whole quaint and weird. A sort of Mooresque palace, or temple, upon which a crowd of angels, demons, sprites, dwarfs, and creatures half human, half animal, swarmed as bees upon

a hive—peering in and out of the windows, climbing over the roof, attacking and defending the doors. There was nothing in common between the casket and its keys, except that its outside was made of the same metals—iron, silver, and gold.

Certain inquisitive neighbours, excited by the rumours that were current, took heart of grace (and a ladder) and watched Master Hugh at his work through a window of the old brewhouse. They saw the great machine growing, day by day, more horribly incomprehensible. They saw it move, and heard it groan. They beheld lumps of clay and metal gradually taking unholy forms, and you may be sure that such scandals lost nothing in the telling. One veracious reporter had seen the Prince of Darkness himself blowing the forge bellows!

When it became known that the worker had taken the son of the reputed witch

into his service to assist him in his mysterious labours, and that the reputed witch herself was living in his house, there was great excitement in the good city. It was not reported that the reputed witch passed hours on her knees praying that her benefactor might be delivered from evil—that she went regularly to church and confession, and was religious to fanaticism. It was not considered that Desmond had befriended others besides old Dame Denys, simply because they were friendless or oppressed. Against either—standing alone—there was only a vague suspicion; but although zero, multiplied by zero, gives no value in arithmetic; nothing, multiplied by nothing—according to Scandal's rule—very often makes *something*; and so it was when Hugh Desmond's unproved sorcery, and Martha Denys' unproved witchcraft, were put together.



CHAPTER II.

THE EFFECT OF HOLY WATER.



ARTHA DENYS did more than pray for the soul of her defender. She determined to save him in spite of herself. He was such a good man, such a kind master, that it was impossible he could be willingly going to destruction. The arch deceiver had him in his toils, and mayhap would soon have his assistant—her son—also. True it was that the young smith's work was not of an occult nature. He forged, and hammered, and cast metals, as an honest man might

do ; and laughed at the fears and prayers of his pious parent. But he did not sit up at night over those gruesome books, or know for what awful use the instruments he made were intended. No, Hugh Desmond was to have his eyes opened, and the fiend exorcised by a sprinkling of the old brewhouse with holy water.

Remember this was in the “good old times.” In holy water Martha Denys put her trust. Had not the saints of old fought and beaten the—the *goat* with it, over and over again? Had not even sinners used it to his discomfiture? She took a flacon to her priest, and, for a consideration, obtained a quart of liquid of more than common holiness — of XXX strength against the powers of darkness—and brought it reverently to her room in Master Hugh’s house. But how was she to administer the sacred disinfectant? That was the question! For her life she dared

not enter that infernal laboratory. She had looked in once and was terrified. The sight that met her view was evil enough, disguised as it was by infernal artifices. What would it not be when that weird machine and those fearsome instruments resumed their right forms as dæmons of the nethermost pit under the influence of her holy water? What was she to do? Take her son into the plot? He would only laugh at it. Find some other instrument? Easily said, but where?—she a stranger and mistrusted! At last she found an accessory in the person of a naughty little boy.

The naughty little boy, who goes where he is not wanted, spies into what is not intended for him to see, and does generally what he is forbid (as they say in America) out of sheer “cussedness,” is not peculiar to any country or any age. I dare say there were naughty little boys in Nineveh,

who played tip-cat in the streets, and made personal remarks upon the subjects of Sardanapalus, pretty much as they vex the lieges of Queen Victoria with such pastimes and observations in this year of grace.

There were certainly naughty little street boys in Manchester when James the First was king, and in one of these Dame Martha put her trust. Too young to understand what was whispered of Master Hugh Desmond's work, he was all agog to see what was in the old brewhouse, and so steal a march upon his companions. He was to mount on a ladder to a window from which a good sight could be had, and the only service exacted as the price of this treat, was just to scatter some water out of a bottle as far and as widely as he could. This was fun in itself. Naughty little boys like throwing water—at a safe distance—over people.

Dame Martha did not tell him it was holy water, and I'm afraid it would not have much mattered if she had. Up he went like a lamplighter, and was somewhat disappointed, when he reached his coign of vantage, to find that there was no one to sprinkle; but when he saw that grim machine moving by itself, his heart (or one of his legs) failed him. He slipped, and down fell the flaçon, still corked, plump into a crucible of molten metal, which Master Hugh, by some forgetfulness, had left uncovered when he went out. It was well for him that he *had* gone out. An awful explosion followed. The crucible was blown to atoms, and its fiery contents scattered far and wide.

Dame Martha fell on her knees, and invoked the entire calendar of saints. All the neighbours rushed out to see what had happened, and when the cause was elicited from the trembling author of the

blow-up, there were found those who had seen the father of mischief himself *in propria persona*—hoofs, horns, tail and all! flying out amidst the smoke. All this was duly reported to Master Willford.

“Ho, ho,” he mused; “if Martha Denys be not a witch, her master is a wizard. Peradventure they were in league together, and the one grew jealous of the other’s power. The devil can quote Scripture for his purpose—why may not a witch use holy water for hers?”

Manchester was but a small town then, and the news soon spread. It took this form. A holy priest, scandalised by what he had heard of Master Hugh’s proceedings, went in full canonicals, and preceded by the holy cross, to the old brewhouse, and found the doors locked. At a touch of the sacred emblem they flew open, and discovered the tenant working at his forge, and Satan blowing the bellows! At the

sight of the priest, the evil one made a dash to escape, but was met with a douche of holy water, upon which he seized his disciple, rent the building in twain, and carried him away, shrieking, to the nether regions !

The sight of Master Hugh walking about in the flesh somewhat invalidated this narrative in some of its details ; but the undoubted fact that Satan had been *seen* flying away remained. Now it was easy to take a defenceless woman to the river and try her for a witch ; but to deal with a man of Desmond's wealth, and a justice of the peace to boot, was a ticklish business. So good Master Willford told his informant to wait and watch.

That night there were two more explosions, on a smaller scale, and caused deliberately. Master Hugh mended his broken furnace, set a crucible in the blast, and when the metal it contained was liquid,

suspended over it, by means of a string and pulley, a bottle of water which had *not* been blessed. Then, having retired to a safe distance, he let go the line. Down fell the bottle, and blow-up number two followed as a matter of course.

Then he sent for several of his late father's friends, to explain the phenomenon of the morning; but only one, Master Symes, accepted the invitation.

"Well, old Symes is a staid and respected citizen," thought Desmond; "his word will be taken, and these ridiculous rumours silenced."

So, in the presence of that worthy, of the young smith, and of his mother—who with the greatest difficulty was persuaded to come as far as the door, where she stood repeating *paters* and *aves* as fast as her tongue could move, and clasping the largest crucifix she could find—the supposed wizard prepared for explosion num-

ber three, which went off to his entire satisfaction.

“Strange!” he mused, as he sat alone afterwards. “Passing strange! Fire and water, both servants of man, each the enemy of the other! Can it be that out of their strife for mastery may come that FORCE I seek?—that power which man is destined to subdue to his will?”

Daybreak found him pursuing the train of thought thus opened; and then he mounted his horse, and rode away on one of his mysterious journeys, still thinking, planning, wondering, groping blindly on the verge of the great discovery which had yet to be made.

Southward he rode, through a country where now the streams run like ink; where earth, and air, and sky are soaked in blackness, and no green thing can thrive; where at night you can no more count the furnaces that blaze than you can count the

stars when under the Southern Cross. He rode over breezy heaths, where only the call of the partridge or the cry of the bittern was heard; through shady lanes of the young May blossom; and in the waters that he forded, white lilies flowered, and trout, scared by the splash of his horse's hoofs, darted like silver arrows from the shallows.

All night he rode, and there were no lights to guide him but those in the clear heaven. In the early morning, he drew rein in front of a grange, such as we may find even now in the midlands—a long, low building, half wood, half stone, whose massive oaken beams and rafters would suffice, split up, to build a modern terrace. Thatched was the roof, and the windows unglazed (only grand houses had glazed windows in those days), all but one, and in that four globes of glass served for what we should call “panes.” This mode of letting

in light and keeping out the weather was common enough in Italy at the time; but the few travellers who passed wondered at it, as, indeed, they did at much about those who adopted it.

Hugh Desmond rode up to the porch, and "Carissima" rose to his lips, as he dismounted. He had not time to say the word—he was locked in a woman's arms.

"Ah, Hugo, mio! I knew it was you! I felt you were coming. I have watched for you all night. The saints be praised, you are come at last!" she murmured, in a slight foreign accent, with her arms about his neck and her soft young cheek nestling on his shoulder. "You are come," she repeated, over and over again, as though in those three words were the greatest happiness that heaven could grant her.

"And the little ones?" he asked, raising her face to kiss it again.

"Well—both well. You shall go to

them directly, only let me hold you thus a little longer, to be sure—*quite* sure.”

And she tightened the fold of her loving arms, and bent upon him the gaze of lustrous, dreamy, dark blue eyes, swimming in soft delight.

“You have me, sure enough!” he laughed.

“For a long time? Say for a long time.”

She held him off a little as she spoke, and a tinge of sadness or anxiety darkened her face.

“For longer than before, Sweetheart.”

“Is that an English word—Sweetheart?” she asked, again nestling on his bosom.

“A good English word. Why not?”

“It sounds not so ; it is so gentle.”

“You love not our tongue !”

“Oh, yes! for it is yours ; but it is rough—all but that word. Call me ‘Sweet-heart’ again ?”

“Sweetheart—*wife*! That to my ears has the better sound. It holds all the other, and more,” said Desmond.

“More—for every one?” she asked.

“For me.”

“It likes me not as well,” she said, shaking her head. “Let me be ‘Sweet-heart’ always.”

He kissed her again, and they passed in.

Why did he hide in the lonely Grange that fair woman who loved him so? Why visit her so seldom that she had to strain him closely to her heart to be sure that his coming was not a dream? Why did he not take her to his home, and call her before all the world by that name—wife—he held so dear? Was he ashamed of her for her birth? She was of a noble—an all but princely race; Othello like, he had won her—soldier of fortune, buccaneer as he was—and like the Moor, had married

for beauty and a tender heart. That was the head and front of his offending. A dire, unpardonable offence in the Italy of that time.

There was no regularly organized society—as some have pretended—in existence to watch over the daughters of great houses and save them from Desdemona's fate, or dissolve unequal alliances with three inches of steel. But there was what came to much the same thing—an understanding between fathers and brothers that a plebeian who ventured to mix his blood with theirs should not be permitted to live. It was a point of honour that he should be made away with. Popes, kings, and cardinals, might take the flowers of their flock as mistresses, and the family was flattered rather than otherwise by such favours, and not too proud to profit by such shame; but an unennobled lover pronounced his own death sentence when

he swore before God to love and cherish one of these as his wife. Go where he would, they found him sooner or later. Do what he might, they struck him down—not sword in hand like men, but with the poignard of the hired bravo, or the drugs of the secret poisoner. No lapse of time condoned the crime, no distance placed between him and its scene, protected the criminal. Vengeance was sometimes slow, but always sure, inexorable as the grave. A Scottish gentleman, who stole a daughter of the Visconti, was assassinated fifteen years afterwards. Nor was the death of the principal offender the end of such vendettas. Sometimes the wife, and even the children were sacrificed.

Again I say these were your “good old times!” Hugh Desmond had secretly wooed and won a lady in whose veins ran such noble blood, and he learned too late what his love had brought upon her.

One thing was in his favour. He was not known in Mantua. He had arrived in that city but a day when the soft blue eyes took him captive, and the week was not over before he had his bride safe on the sea. Love burns up quickly in Italy, and the whilom buccaneer was a lusty wooer.

No one knew with whom the lady Maria had eloped save her old nurse, who was the contriver and partner of her flight. It was from this worthy that Master Hugh learned his danger, and it was on her advice that he hid his darling in that lonely Grange, where their faithful attendant died soon after the birth of his first child.

He could be identified only through his wife, and his plan was to keep her in secret till she had mastered the English language, and lost, as far as possible, all traces of her foreign birth. To take her to his home, and present her to his father and] his

friends, would have been to provoke all manner of questioning and speculation. Besides, in those "good old times" folks looked askance at foreigners, particularly on foreign women.

Old John Desmond often perplexed his son by urging him to marry, and let him (the father) hold a grandchild on his knee before he died. Many and many a time did Master Hugh think of the bright-eyed boy in his Staffordshire Grange, and long to cheer the old man's heart with a sight of his sunny face ; but he dared not.

His fears were not for himself. He and death had met so often, that steel and shot had no terrors for him. He was also somewhat of a fatalist, and believed in astrology, as was proper at the time. His horoscope had been cast, and a long life predicted for him.

Maria never knew the reason why she was to forget the soft language of her girl-

hood, and not to teach it to her children. It was her husband's will—that was enough for her. Her life in the lonely Grange was woefully dull after gay Mantua, but it was the home her husband had provided, and that was enough for her. The only thing against which her gentle heart rebelled, was his long absences, and even these became more bearable as the children grew up, and could talk with her of him.

So six years passed, and the plan worked well.

“Tell me now, Sweetheart,” said Hugh, when he had kissed the little ones (a boy and a girl) and appeased their clamorous delight; “tell me what has passed since last I saw thee.”

“Oh, nothing—nothing of import.”

“Tell me all, and leave me to judge if it be of import or no.”

“Well, the great beech tree was blown down by a storm. The Holy Virgin be

praised ! it fell at night, else had our little ones been hurt, for oft they play beneath its shade."

"They would not have been out in the storm, thou fond one ; but on with thy tale."

"There is nothing—stay ! Oh, the peacock is dead."

"Peace to his ashes," said Desmond.

"And I have sixteen little chickens."

"A notable housewife, truly ! But tell me what has passed outside the house. Hast thou been abroad ? Hast thou seen any ?"

"Didst thou not say that I was not to go abroad ?" she asked, as an answer to his first question. "I have seen none—except——"

"Well ?"

"A poor wandering beggar, dear ; so faint and lame ! A stranger, too ; I could but take pity on him."

“A stranger! Do you mean a foreigner?”

“He was of Italy—a countryman, Hugo. Why do you start and look so pale? Surely it were inhuman to let any poor soul pass in such a plight—but a countryman! I gave him food and wine, and he went his way blessing me.”

“You spoke Italian with him?”

“A word or two—only a word or two—which flew out unconsidered when he addressed me in my native tongue. Then I remembered your wish, Ah, Hugo! ’twas but a few words, and only to a poor beggar.”

“Describe to me this beggar.”

“He was fainting with hunger, and his feet——”

“Tell me of his face, his form.”

“Tall and dark, and thin-visaged.”

“With a scar on his right cheek?”

“In sooth he had! Have you seen him? Did he speak of me?” she asked, with interest.

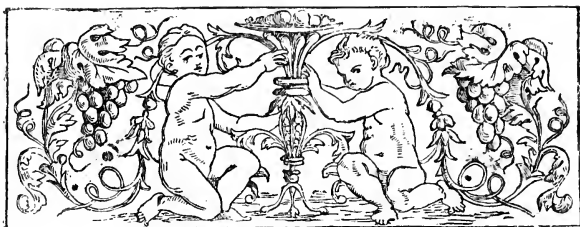
"I have seen him," Hugh replied, moodily.

"And you are angry," she said, in a reproachful tone; "angry with poor Sweetheart because, when one of her own people cried to her for charity in the name of God, she for a moment forgot your desires, and spoke three little words of her own dear tongue!"

"Not angry," he answered; "only fearsome of a danger you wot not of. In all I do, I but seek thy safety, thy happiness," he continued, drawing her head upon his shoulder, and caressing her soft cheek. "Only fearsome, wife mine, not angry."

"Then call me Sweetheart?"

"Sweetheart!"



CHAPTER III.

THE SEARCH-WARRANT.

IN Master Willford's lodgings, near Deansgate, sat the witch-finder, in earnest conversation with a foreigner—some had it—whose acquaintance he had lately made, and who might have passed as a master mariner. And, indeed, it was in that capacity that he was known to Willford; but a careful observer might have remarked that seafarers did not usually wear such fine linen, or have such delicate, soft hands.

They spoke in English, which the mariner,

who was addressed as Vincenti Porras, spoke pretty fluently, and their talk was of the events which were exciting the good town—the awful events which had passed in the workshop of Hugh Desmond, and his sudden disappearance.

“I knew not,” said Porras, “that such lore was practised in your country. We deem the English—pardon me—as too dull and fond of trade to meddle with the occult sciences.”

“Alas! my friend,” replied Willford, “the devil works alike with all nations; but thou art partly in the right. Such dealings as this man hath with the powers of darkness are not common (thanks be to the Lord!) amongst us. He learned them in foreign parts.”

“Ha! He has been abroad! Where?”

“I cannot tell thee with exactitude. He hath sojourned in the Americas, and on the Spanish main; he hath been in the East

among the Moslems, who are skilled, I hear, in unholy knowledge. For twenty years he has been a wanderer on the face of the earth, and lastly he came from Italy."

"How know you *that*, Master Willford?"

"Because a huge coffer, full (as it now appears) of unholy utensils and wicked books, was thence despatched after him."

"From what port?"

"From Venice."

"Art sure?"

"The merchant who received it for him from the ship is here now. He will tell thee it is so."

"Nay, I doubt thee not, Master Willford—thou who art so exact! I warrant me there is little in this man's history that thy skill will not unravel."

"'Tis my duty, good señor; 'tis the duty of every God-fearing man to denounce such

as he ; and this stiff-necked generation will not hearken unto me if I give not proofs."

"Has he a wife?" asked Porras, after a pause.

"Nay, nay ; wizards marry not, or are given in marriage," said the witch-finder, with a grave shake of his head.

"Pardon me if again I say—art sure?"

"He has a light way with women who favour him, but he seeks neither wife nor paramour. They never do."

"Knowest thou whither he has gone?"

"Not as yet. I shall know. I have those upon his tracks whom he will hardly baffle."

"Mayhap he will return when he deems this storm has somewhat blown over."

"It will not blow over."

"It *should* not, Master Willford."

"It shall not."

"Has it not seemed to thee," said the

mariner, drawing his chair closer, and leaning over the table, "that now he is away would be a good time for making perquisition in his house?"

"I have thought of that," Willford replied; "but the justices will not grant a warrant. He is one of themselves, and for very shame they will not do right."

"But, Master Willford, there be other folk living in that house. There is the woman who was tried as a witch."

"The people deem her innocent; they lay all the blame upon her master now," said Willford, with a gleam of triumph in his eye.

"If the law deny them justice, the people should take it for themselves," said the Spaniard.

"This is England, señor; the law is respected."

"Even when corrupt?"

“Aye, even when corrupt in one limb; the body of it is pure.”

“Listen, my friend. For a great good, one may do a little evil.”

“The doctrine of the Society of Jesus! —a detestable, damnable heresy!” cried Willford.

“Patience, patience! The evil whereof I speak is not one which affects the soul. ’Tis naught but what, at its worst, would be a slight, momentary injustice to one—easily repaired—which would do a great justice to all.”

“Speak what is in thy mind.”

“What if this woman’s son were accused of a theft? He is but a smith. He has no friends in power. A warrant might be got to search *his* lodgings, and the search be easily followed to where he works. Give him a rose-noble and declare that he has been wrongfully accused, and what harm comes to him? But in the while

this Hugh Desmond's books and papers may pass into your hands; and who knows what else to criminate him might be found? Think it over, Master Willford, think it over. The law, or those who administer it, stands between thee and justice—between thee and thy Christian *duty*, my friend. Did not Joseph accuse his best-loved brother of theft, the better to work out God's will?"

"It were difficult," murmured Willford, "and if it should fail——"

"Leave it to me, and it will not fail," said the other, quickly.

"Thou takest a strange interest in the matter, señor."

"I take a deep interest in thee, Master Willford. Thou art a good man, and it urks me to see thee baffled in thy good work."

It is unnecessary to record what more passed between these worthies. That night

there was an outcry in an ale-house much frequented by smiths. A tall, gaunt man, with a scar on his face—a foreigner—had been robbed. He had got very drunk on the unaccustomed liquor. A young smith had made great fun with him ; rolled him on the floor, blackened his face, and performed upon him other horse play ; but when he came to his senses in the morning, his purse was gone, and he loudly accused that young smith of having stolen it. The foreigner's master (also a foreigner) took the case up warmly. His servant was an honest man, though he did take too much ale ; he was incapable of making a false accusation. As the young smith had left the drinking shop before the man recovered, he had an opportunity of hiding that purse. Let it be searched for. Nay, the smith's own character demanded such an inquest, for if the purse were *not* found he would be cleared. So the justices

granted their search-warrant, little thinking to what extended use it would be put.

The constable to whom this warrant was entrusted for execution was an official of the Dogberry type—a big, fat man, with a high opinion of his own importance and power, and a grudge against Master Hugh, who had snubbed him from the bench more than once for the manner in which that power had been exercised. He did not love Master Hugh, and readily fell in with the views of Señor Porras as to how the search-warrant should be used. He thought that Señor Porras (though a foreigner) was a very superior man, and the Señor declared loudly that he would to Heaven they had in his country such zealous and intelligent officers as the constable.

“There is small need,” said the wily one, “to point out to one of thy experience that if this young man be a thief he will not hide his spoil in his own chamber. No,

no ; the more so, when there is that laboratory of his master which none may enter for (as he may think) a safe place of deposit. It is *there*, as you so justly said just now, that our search should be made, Master Constable."

Master Constable had not said one word about searching the laboratory, but he pursed up his lips and nodded his head with Burleighian wisdom all the same.

The chamber of the accused Gregory Denys was searched as a matter of form, as also was that of his mother, and nothing was found. The searchers then proceeded to the old brew-house, accompanied by the young smith—as usual, hammer in hand. He had treated the accusation as an honest man should, with a mixture of indignation and ridicule. They might turn his quarters topsy-turvy, if they pleased, all the better for him, but when they began to meddle with his master's belongings, he

growled and followed them here and there like a faithful watch-dog, gripping his hammer now and again, pretty much as his canine type might show his teeth.

“What is this?” said Señor Porras, halting in front of the casket of the three keys, already described; “a strange piece of handicraft, truly.”

“But not for thee to tamper with,” said Gregory, bringing down his hammer with a thud on the block on which it stood. “That is my master’s. He alone has the keys, and he left the town before yon rascal accused me.”

“Well, well, let it rest, Master Constable,” Porras replied. “It is not in such things, as well thou knowest, that stolen goods are bestowed. Hast searched, as Master Constable bade thee, in the ashes of the forge and the lumber on yon shelves?” he continued, to the lesser powers of the law.

Now Master Constable, though a big man, had a small supply of valour, and the weird contents of the laboratory, especially the great machine, scared him not a little. He kept close to the Señor, and echoed his words in a feeble voice. "Aye, aye, search as I bade thee, my masters; search well as as I bade thee, in the ashes and amongst the lumber," he repeated. So they raked about the furnace, and turned out crucibles, and caused consternation to rats and mice and beetles, and raised a great dust, but found not what they sought. As they searched and no harm came, Master Constable took heart, and assisted them with an "Ah! this is a likely spot," or an "It misgave me that we should not find it here," according to circumstances.

They did not notice what Señor Porras was about the while; but he was busy—very busy. A cry of horror from the valiant constable disturbed him.

In a far corner, where alembics, retorts, and other instruments of alchemy were stored, they had come upon a pile of bones !

“The Lord preserve us ! There has been murder done !” cried the constable. “See, good Master Porras, these be dead men’s bones ! Oh ! alack, alack !”

Porras took up one of the bones, and a smile glimmered for an instant on his gaunt visage as he examined it. He threw it down again, and drew the constable aside.

“Thou hast indeed made a fearful discovery,” said the former ; “one that might well affright a man of lesser parts. But thou knowest thy duty ; thou knowest the law. Thou art here for one purpose ; stick to that, Master Constable, and meddle not with what might cause thee trouble. Lay it upon thy knaves that they say nothing touching those relics, and do thou keep

thy own counsel till thou canst act safely ; mark me—safely.”

“ ’Tis just what I was about to say to thyself, good señor,” said the constable. “ Not a word, I pray thee, about the bones. Good Lord ! What a coil ! what a coil ! ”

After this, the search went on with relaxed vigour. Master Constable was no longer the foremost, poking and prying here and there. His men were ready enough to tell each other to move this, or shake out that, but hung back from touching anything themselves. None could tell what further horror might be disclosed, and all were relieved when Señor Porras, who had again been at work in his own way, came forward and said, “ Good Master Constable, if *thou* hast not found the purse in this space, be sure it is not here.”

“ I did so conclude a while ago,” said the constable, “ but for thy sake, to con-

tent thee the more, I did continue. Art satisfied?"

"Aye, fully." There was an evil gleam in his eyes as he spoke.

"Thou hearest," said the constable to his men. "He is fully satisfied. Thou wilt tell the justices, Señor Porras, that I have made full perquisition; and that thou art satisfied."

"Aye, that I will."

Then did the law's executive impress upon his followers the necessity of keeping the discovery of those bones a dead secret, as they valued his favour.

"For," said he, "peradventure there may come somewhat out of this, and peradventure there may not. If haply there hath been a crime committed, it is not like grave and valiant officers to talk of it like idle gossips; and if not, then mayhap thine ears may smart if thy tongue wags loosely."

As they left the house, they found a large crowd assembled in the street. The news that the premises of Hugh Desmond were being searched, had leaked out and spread. Long before the searchers appeared the result of their search was known. They had found the dead body of the wizard (for it was Satan himself who had appeared in his likeness the next day in the streets) on the roof where the evil one had dropped him. When they touched his magic books they had burst into flames in their hands, and so on. The real cause, or excuse for the search, was unknown, or forgotten, amidst these exciting reports.

Foremost in the press stood the man who had lost his purse, and upon him Señor Porras turned in anger.

"Why, thou drunken loon!" he shouted, "thou hast wronged an innocent man! Stand back, good people, press not so upon us, I pray you. There is nothing to tell—nothing,"

he said, as the crowd began to clamour for news. "We have searched the chamber of this good smith, and found nothing that an honest man may not have. We have searched diligently the place where he works, and Master Constable here will tell you that we have not found anything that an honest man may not have. I am going too far. I was about to say as before—nothing that an honest man may not have, but that would not be truth. Let me say instead, nothing of *his*—of Gregory Denys', mark you—that was not lawful. We did truly find—but that is naught at present. Oh, my masters, you are well served. Nothing escapes Master Constable. He is a man who knows his duty, and does it without regard of persons. But thou"—turning again upon his retainer—"thou soft-brained guzzler! Thou hast brought thyself into a pretty coil. Accuse this honest smith of robbing thee! Does he look like

a cut-purse?—thou fool! Robbed thee of thy money, and thou drunk! How knowest thee that thou hadst any money upon thee? Come, come! fair is fair. We have searched the lodgings of the accused; let us now see what may be found in the chamber of the accuser; and I tell thee plainly, Marco, before these good men, that if thy purse—a plague on't!—be there, thou shalt forfeit it to the man thou hast wrongfully charged with its loss. Is that fair?”

“ ’Tis just!—’Tis right!—A worthy gentleman, and a well spoken!” broke from the crowd, and away they scampered to Dean’s-gate to see the fun, and they were rewarded.

In less than ten minutes the crestfallen Marco was shown his purse, taken from the pocket of one of his own doublets, which he had put off the very day he had taken too much of that strong ale! Señor Porrás was furious. “Thou’rt forsworn! Thou art

disgraced ! And thou has disgraced me—thy master. Wretch ! On thy knees and crave this good man's pardon. I prythee be not hard with him," he said aside in an under tone to Gregory ; " he is but a foolish lad, and honest in the main. 'Twas the liquor that betrayed him. Take his money—justly thine—as compensation, and pardon him. Thou wast innocent. Had I seen thy face before this matter went so far, I would not have believed a word against thee—no one would."

But Gregory was made of too stern stuff for such soft-solder to penetrate.

" To the devil with thy purse and thee !" he growled, as he flung the one out of the window, and turned on his heel from the other. The purse fell upon the stones below and burst. The crowd scrambled for the scattered coins, and there was an end of events for that day, so far as this history is concerned.

But not an end to talk over what had happened, of questions, and surmises, and scandal. What was it that Master Constable had found in the old brew-house? Nothing unlawful belonging to Gregory Denys, for the señor (who had become very popular by grace of that scramble) had said so; but there was something unlawful there. Some mystery. Was it true about the dead body and the blazing books? No one had denied it.

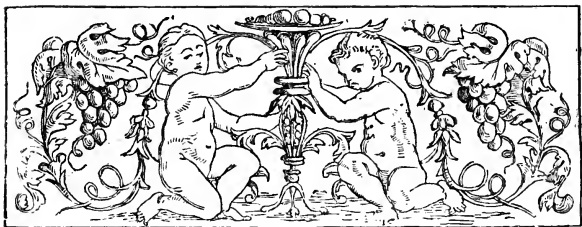
Cross-examined by his wife—who was a lady of a curious mind, and not to be denied information—Master Constable confessed—under a solemn pledge of secrecy—about those bones. The awful secret burned in the breast of Mistress Constable as a half-crown burns in the pocket of a school-boy, and she yearned to spend it. What is the use of knowing more than your neighbours if you may not tell it? Under a pledge of solemn secrecy, she told her

particular friend, who passed it on under similar conditions, until all Manchester was raving about the bones. They were bones of infants, which the wizard had boiled down to get their fat. They were the bones of old John Maitland, who had disappeared! They were the wizard's own bones! They were the bones of his father, which he had sacrilegiously rifled from the grave to aid in his unholy rites! Alas for popularity! All the good deeds that Hugh Desmond had done, all his kind words, all his gallant defending of the poor, were forgotten. To the winds went good Master Symes' explanation of the holy water affair! He had been deceived. The old version was revived, and this followed so quickly by that gruesome discovery, suggesting worse than murders—damned Hugh Desmond. Living or dead he was a wizard. Dead he was to be held accursed—living he was to be cursed, and die.

Master Willford had taken no part in the search, but its result—so far as it has been recorded here—was duly reported to him by Señor Porras.

“Let it work, my friend,” said the latter, when he had told his tale. “It will all come out—the more so I advised them to keep it secret.”

That same night Señor Porras and his man Marco rode out of Manchester. Rode, when they cleared the town, not as master and man. They travelled as equals and companions side by side, and their talk was not in Spanish, but Italian. They rode on the very tracks which Hugh Desmond had left on moor and fell, five days before—Marco leading, for he had been that way already.



CHAPTER IV.

NOBLESSE OBLIGE.



HE noble house of Ribolini was not fortunate with its rising generation when the seventeenth century was in its first decade. The only daughter had died, in the prime of her youth and beauty, of a malady so sudden and virulent, that her friends were shocked by the appearance of her funeral cortège before they knew of her illness.

She was lost almost on the eve of her marriage, and there were some who shook their heads and said that perhaps she was

happier as it was ; for the union, arranged by her family, did not promise well for her. The bridegroom elect—a distant cousin—was old enough to be her father ; a stern, cold man, with a face cut, as it seemed, out of grey stone, and a heart to match ; but rich, and a near relative of the Gonzagas, who ruled Mantua in that day. But young ladies had to do what they were told in those good old times.

The only son was what we should call “fast.” I do not know what name they had then for young nobles who found their pleasures outside of the parental palace, and sowed wild oats in the St. John’s Woods (be sure there were such glades) of the Italian cities. He had a roving, wild, unsatisfactory disposition, this Cosmo de Ribolini, and, as a matter of course, was his mother’s darling.

It had pleased him to spend much of his time away from paternal control in Venice,

and formed ideas in that freer atmosphere which were shocking to the head of his house. He had, moreover, evinced indifference about the traditions of his family, and could not be got to study the duties to be expected of him when he should become its chief. The fact was, that these traditions and duties had been sprung upon him at an age when he could not understand what was meant; and when his mind was matured sufficiently to comprehend them, it sickened against the so oft-repeated dose.

His father had married late in life, and his mother died shortly after the loss of her daughter. He had no companion but his sister; and when she was taken away, the last tie which bound him to the dull old Mantua palace was severed. He visited the principal seats of learning in Italy, sojourned in Rome and Venice, and learned a great many things of which his

grim old father, who had never travelled a hundred miles in his life, knew nothing, and disliked by intuition. It was well, for some reasons, that this pair were kept a good deal apart. The son was in advance of his time, the father behind it. He considered "the house" as a kingdom, and its head as a king with absolute power, even of life and death, over its members.

It was out of this idea that the social law, mentioned in a former chapter, arose, and was justified. The great houses considered themselves above the law. They resented interference from without; but were by no means slow to stretch their own authority when an opportunity presented. Half the feuds and vendettas of the day arose out of some one having punished some one else's servant, or taken the part of some one else's client. It was only when the class or its privileges were attacked that they stood together, and

bearded pope, emperor, or king in defence of their cherished feudal rights.

One of these was to regulate their own households. An unauthorized suitor came a-wooing with his life in his hand. His own kin would fight for him as long as he lived; but when he took the inevitable consequences of his rashness, his fall was, as a rule, unresented. If the Count Paris had caught Romeo in Juliet's balcony, and had disposed of him, I do not think there would have been any further slaughter of Capulets on Montagus on that score. Something like a verdict of "serve him right" would probably have been recorded. Those old enemies would have hated each other a little more, and have become somewhat quicker (if possible) to pick a quarrel; but it would not have suited either of them to deny the abstract right of any gentleman to slay, at sight, the gallant who might rob him of his pro-

mised bride. Nor would justice have interfered. Do you suppose that Romeo was banished because he killed Tybalt? The duke was bothered by these constant street brawls, and wanted peace ; that was all.

No noble in all Italy was more fully convinced of the wisdom and the justice of this principle than the old Count de Ribolini. Several times had he broached the subject to his son, as an abstract proposition, but without producing any interest in his hearer. The time came when he had to put it in a more practical form.

“Your conduct, my son,” he said one day, soon after Cosmo’s return from a long sojourn in the queen city of the Adriatic, “angers and grieves me. If heaven had so willed it, I should have depended upon another to uphold the honours and dignity of our house, and have allowed thee to sink into the companion of traders, and the friend

of the foes to law and order, that it seems thy will to be. But my hopes have been disappointed. I have only thee; and there is a matter of grave import, the further concealment of which would be a sin against my order. Thou must know it, and act as becomes a Ribolini. Cosmo, my son, prepare thyself for a startling revelation. In the tomb of our race, under the inscription to the memory of thy sister Maria, there was no body laid !”

“ Maria not dead !” gasped the young man.

“ Dead to thee, dead to me—a thousand times dead to our house,” replied his father, sternly. “ Were she burned with fire, and her ashes scattered to the four winds of heaven, she would be less dead to us than she is. But yet she lives—DISGRACED !”

“ Oh, my sister !”

“ Thou hast no sister. She who was once my daughter was affianced, as thou

knowest, to Vincenti Della Torre ; but two days before the time fixed for her marriage, she fled, accompanied by her nurse—and another.”

“ His name, father ? ”

“ Patience. To hide our disgrace, we gave out that she had died suddenly, and a coffin, supposed to contain her remains, was carried in pomp to the grave. Ah, me ! It was said that grief had burned up my tears. I was crushed to the earth—but by humiliation, Cosmo, not by sorrow.”

“ Art sure—art certain there is cause ? Oh, father ! she may not be dishonoured. Bethink thee. Maidens have been carried off against their will ; have been murdered, when they strayed abroad, for their jewels ; have been drowned by accident, and never heard of again.”

“ Have I not told thee she lives ? She fled of her own free will, as part of a letter

found in her chamber proves. She fled with her lover."

"I was a man, and you told me not!" said Cosmo, through his clenched teeth.

"Thou wert a rash, hot-headed boy. I will not so far wrong thee as to suppose thou wouldst have intentionally betrayed our secret, but thine acts would have given it to all Mantua before a week had passed. The greatest caution was required—first, to cover our disgrace, and next to find the path for our revenge."

"Who knew of this?"

"Thy mother and Della Torre—none other."

"And none suspect that false burial?"

"None."

"'Tis well. Now tell me how we have been avenged?"

"We are not yet avenged."

"What! After six years?"

"There was no clue to the man. One

after another, the suspicions we formed proved groundless ; but our efforts have not ceased—no, not for a day !—and now,” said the old man, more sternly than ever, laying his hand upon a folded paper, “they are rewarded.”

“Without my aid !” muttered his son, with bitter reproach.

“The quarry is marked only—not struck yet. Read.”

And he read as follows :—

“MOST ILLUSTRIOUS SIR AND DEAR COUSIN—

“This leaves me suffering much in body from privation and sickness on the seas, but hopeful in mind. In my letter from Venice, which I hope was duly placed in thy honourable hands, which I kiss, I informed thee of the reasons which led me to seek in England the sequel of the discovery I had made in Florence. Thou

didst think, I fear me, that the clue was too faint to warrant so long and dangerous a journey ; and, in good sooth, it so appeared. But what wouldst thou? For six years we have been labouring in vain, and what seemed, from time to time, strong confirmation of our suspicions, has melted away as we approached it. Might not (for so I reasoned) what is but a little fact lead up to mighty things? And, thanks to holy St. Joseph, to whom I have never ceased to pray, so it hath come to pass.

“Most illustrious, our good kinsman Marco, who, for the purposes of our plan, deigns to pass in public as my servant, has seen her, has spoken with her, and was not recognized ; for, as thou knowest, they have not met since she was a child. He was disguised as a beggar, and addressed her in her native tongue. At first she answered him in Italian, but took fright for some unknown cause, and pretended

not to comprehend his words. She is living in a lonely farmhouse in the province they call Staffordshire, where he—the man we seek—visits her from time to time. Having thus found the hen bird in her nest, it is easy to track her mate. By the time that this shall reach thee, I shall know him.

“Let me now, if it please thee, return to what passed at Venice. An Englishman, whose name I could not ascertain, set sail from that city, soon after the accursed day; with one who passed as his wife, and an old woman whose description proves her to be the traitress Bertha. The ship was bound for Chester, in England; but she was lost on her next voyage, her patron is dead, and there is no one living in the aforesaid city who can, or will, help me to trace the man. I am searching in neighbouring towns, and this is wrote in Manchester. Thou wilt ask, why not wait

for him where she is ? I will answer thee. There is no town within a league ; and for us, foreigners as we are, to lurk about the spot would surely arouse suspicion, and mayhap afright our quarry ; whereas, by hunting in a circle, we shall surely come upon his traces, and at last discover him in the place he cometh from. They are undoubtedly married, and have two children—a boy and a girl.

“ In my love and respect for thee, Most Illustrious, I am as much thy son, as though the honour thou destined for me were truly mine ; but our kinship is remote, and this matter is too grave for me to act therein at my own will. Touching the man my course is plain. He dies, but for the rest I wait thy orders. It is time that thy son should act in this. Send him to me with speed, I beseech thee, or write, and address thy missive to me, as Señor Porras of the Netherlands, at the ‘ Golden Boar,’ in

Deansgate, of the town of Manchester England, by a trusty messenger, as be- seems the importance thereof.

“Thy loving kinsman, and faithful servant,

“VINCENTI.”

In these bad young times, a brother whose sister had eloped would read with a deep sigh of relief such words as “they are undoubtedly married,” but the brows of Cosmo Ribolini darkened more over that passage than any other. Was it because a nameless adventurer had stolen a daughter of his house, and dared to wed her? His father, who was watching him intently as he read, thought so. He finished the letter to its signature, and re-perused it, before he laid it down. Both father and son remained silent for a while—each apparently loth to be the first to speak. At last the younger blood gave way.

“When came this to hand?” asked Cosmo.

“Yester morn, and it behoves me to act upon it without tarrying. Canst not thou divine what I would do?”

“I am bewildered, surprised. I——”

“’Tis just that thou shouldst be so,” interposed his father. “I blame thee not for thy inability to answer me. All this cometh on thee of a sudden, and thou hast not had time to weigh well its portent—I would give thee till to-morrow to think it over; but time presses. I must reply to the Count Vincenti this night, and thou must be the bearer of my letter.”

“I?”

“None other. It is the duty of our order, my son, to act as its judges in such matters as this, and to be the executioners of its decrees. What did the De Este when the Visconti Spanello wooed their daughter against their will?”

“He was stabbed in her balcony, and she compelled to wash up his blood, like a menial.”

“True. And when the young Benedetti—half-witted as he was—pretended to have married a minnie-singer, hast heard what was done upon them, and their scum?”

Cosmo turned pale, and trembled. His father, taking his silence as a negative, proceeded.

“They were strangled in their bed, and the child in its cradle.”

“The child too?”

“Was a base jonglour’s brat to live and sit with *us*?” cried the old man fiercely. “And the Visconti—what did they? They were foiled as we have been for years, but their righteous vengeance—nay, ’tis *justice*, my son—their *justice* was executed at last, as ours must be; but not by the Count Vincenti,” he

added, with marked emphasis on that name.

“ Oh Father ! do you mean that I——”

“ Patience. Vincenti is a good man ; a loyal, an honourable, and a true, else had I not chosen him as a son. He says justly here (touching the letter) that the matter is too grave for him to manage at his will. But he is wrong in supposing that it is for him to deal with that villain who stole my ——who stole her who was once my child. That is my right and my duty ; and as my age and advancing infirmity forbid me to cross the seas to execute them myself, I make thee—my heir, the future head of my house—my delegate. Slain by the hand of Vincenti, this wretch would die murdered. There are those who have hired daggers for their work, but I will not. I depend on thee, my son, for justice.”

“ You must grant me time—time to think, to realise this horror,” said Cosmo

starting from his seat, and pacing the room, “my brain is in a whirl. It is like a nightmare ; I *cannot* realise it. My sister that was dead—my loved sister for whom I mourned so ! And she is alive, married in a strange land ; has little children, and perchance is happy ! Oh, my father, are those little children doomed ?”

“The boy is doomed,” replied Ribolini severely. “Couldst thou be guilty of such weakness to-morrow, I would disown thee, but I can allow somewhat for thy surprise and confusion to-day. Thou shalt have time to clear thy brain, and chase these unworthy repinings. Happy, sayeth thou ? For shame, for shame ! What if she be happy in her degradation ? The worse for her to be so. It will occupy me full two hours to answer my fair cousin. That will be time enough for thee. Thou canst leave me now, and prepare to start at sunrise.”

He left his father's presence with those last words ringing in his ears and deadening his mind. To start at sunrise! and it was long past mid-day already. Short space for a man to prepare himself to become the executioner of his sister's husband and child. He had not replied to his parent's aspersions upon his conduct and his associates. Sons did not reply in those days; but as the words came back to his memory he felt that they were unjust. He the companion of traders, and friend of the foes to law and order! Why, there was not in all the world a prouder aristocracy than that inscribed in the "Golden Book" of Venice.

Strange it is, but true, that in great bodily perils, or in great mental conflicts, some small matter will creep in and occupy the thoughts. A drowning man will suddenly remember a trifle of his boyhood, and dwell upon it. We have now before

us one who, amidst the astonishing revelations just made to him, could do little but fret over the implied assertion that he was unworthy of his order; and it was this grievance, founded on truth, which (though he did not trace its workings) hardened his heart later on to the duty he was commanded to perform. Let the function be as hard or as disagreeable as you will, once dignify it as one's *right*, and no man cares to see it usurped, or to be superseded in its exercise.

Cosmo Ribolini began to hate the Count Vincenti for what he might have been, and for what he had done. Had not his father told him in almost as many words, that if the count had married his sister he would have become the head of the house? And this because he (Cosmo) preferred gay, bright, beautiful Venice, the home of art and science, to dull old Mantua. He—the only son, the heir—grown man as he was,

had been treated like a child ; family secrets kept back from him, and another, all but a stranger, set to vindicate the family honour in his place. He was bitterly jealous of the Count Vincenti, and he found a grim satisfaction in the thought that he was going to baulk him of the vengeance of which he wrote so confidently.

By the time he reached Venice he had ceased to grieve about his sister. "The man" was to die, and her sorrow would be the same, no matter by whose hand he fell. She need not know who killed him. About the child, he had formed a plan in accordance with the letter of his father's orders. The child had done no harm, and might live, but not as a Ribolini. In this also he would thwart the hated Vincenti.

When Ribolini told his son what had befallen the plebeian wife and child of the heir of the Benedetti, by way of preparation for the duty he had to perform towards

the adventurer who had stolen his sister, and their male offspring, I have said that he grew pale, and trembled. He had repeated unmoved the fate of that unwelcome lover. He knew well enough that a man who went a-wooing amongst his superiors, carried his life in his hand; but this was the first time he had heard of the patricians' "justice" overtaking a woman who had married above her sphere. Such instances were so rare as to be almost unknown. If a peasant maiden found favour in the eyes of a noble, he adopted the simple Sabine plan. There was no talk of priest or ring.

The young Benedetti was an imbecile, and the woman who entrapped him a pariah; what could it matter to Cosmo that her neck was wrung? Well, it caused him a rude awakening from an idea as old as "society" itself, that things which disgraced a woman are permissible to a man.

He considered that his sister had disgraced herself and her race by wedding one that did not belong to her world. Had he been a Bayard, or a Crichton, and not noble, it would have been the same; but he remembered certain vows he had breathed in the ear of one not of his world—no minnie-singer girl was she—and a cold tremor ran through him to the very marrow of his bones.

Oft had he reasoned with himself, “She has beauty and wit enough to grace a throne. She is good and pure as the angels in heaven. What if her lineage be not noble—I do not sink to her level—I raise her to mine.”

As his father spoke, he asked himself would her beauty and goodness weigh in the balance against her ignoble blood. The minnie-singer was strangled, not for being a wanton, but because she was a wife. The marriage was the crime. This made him tremble.

It was but a passing qualm. *His* case was so different (our own cases always are). He was noble, and could do as he pleased. In a few years, perhaps months, he would be master of his own destiny, and who would judge him then? Before he set sail from Venice he renewed his love-pledge to the daughter of a merchant, and departed to kill a merchant's son for having espoused his sister.

In the days of my youth, when I read novels *sub rosa*—or, to speak more accurately, under a certain umbrageous yew tree—readers were fond of making marginal notes of admiration and otherwise. The volumes I get from my circulating library now bear few of such criticisms. We read faster, I suppose, and care less for what we read. Nevertheless, I fancy I hear exclamations of “ridiculous,” “impossible,” in connection with the last paragraph. What! take a human creature's

life for doing what you deliberately propose to do yourself? Absurd! Unjust, if you please, but not unnatural. You think it awfully good fun, my dear young friend, to dance with the lady's-maid at the servants' ball; but you don't like to see your cousin Mary waltzing with the footman. Analyze the reason, and you will understand Cosmo Ribolini.



CHAPTER V.

AMOR VINCIT OMNIA.



ARRIVED in Venice, Cosmo Ribolini went straight to the house —I might say palace—of one of its merchant princes, Bartolomeo Bosco, by whom he was heartily received.

“The saints be praised!” he cried, as he ran down the steps leading to the canal. “It is indeed thy honourable self! I could scarce believe it. Give me thy hand, most illustrious. Thou art come to us again—so soon.”

“So soon!” laughed the young noble,

stepping from his gondola ; “have I worn out my welcome ?”

“Nay, it is as good as new ; but didst thou not say when we parted last that my lord, thy father, opposed thy sojourn here ?”

“In sooth he did, but it is at his bidding that I am come.”

“Blessed be the reason, whatsoe’er it be. Get thee in, get thee in, and leave me to deal with thy baggage. Ho la ! Pietro, Carlo ! Lazy rascals ! dost thou not hear me call ?”

Nothing loth, Cosmo entered the house, and made for a certain balcony where a white robe fluttered.

The wearer had seen the arrival of a gondola, but was too deeply plunged in thought to heed it. They were not happy thoughts, if we might judge by the sad expression which filled her large black eyes. An open book lay unnoticed in her

lap, and one soft little hand was pressed upon the bosom of her dress, pressing a golden locket to her heart. Like “a daughter of the gods, divinely tall and most divinely fair,” was she. Of a stately, almost regal beauty, which in repose seemed cold and passionless, and required a touch of sadness, or of another emotion soon to flash upon her, to make it lovable.

A light step in the corridor behind her, two hands on her eyes, a cry, two names, and——dear ladies ; as it is in the days of Queen Victoria, so it was in the reign of James I., when true lovers met.

The beautiful face was not sad now.

“ Ah, Cosmo ! no more.”

“ One.”

As he drew her towards him, she started and turned pale.

“ Thy father ?”

“ Lives, carissima ! and is well—for him. Didst fancy I had come to claim thee ?

Ah, no, not yet. Patience, my soul. God forbid that I should wish the old man ill, though he loves me not. Patience for a little longer."

"For a lifetime if needs be, caro mio," she replied. "It was but a thought which flashed across my mind. I had not hoped to see thee again till—till then. Thou hast not angered, hast not disobeyed him?" she asked quickly.

"Nay. On the contrary, he is better pleased with me now than he has been for many years."

"He knows that thou art here?"

"He knows that I shall pass here on my travels."

"Thy travels?"

"Yes, beloved; I am but a bird of passage. I take the first ship for England."

She crept closer to him, and he felt her shudder in his arms.

"Why, thou faint heart!" he said cheer-

fully. "Thou a merchant's daughter, and dost fear the sea?"

"I know its perils," she replied. "Oh, Cosmo, must thou go?"

"Indeed, indeed, I must; but have no fear, sweet; at this season there are no storms."

"Storms are not the only perils of the cruel sea."

"But they are the gravest."

"Not so. The fury of the tempest is nothing in comparison to the cruelty of man. Hast never heard," she added, in low, frightened tones, "how my dear father was captured by pirates, and chained like a slave to the oar in their galley?"

"No," he replied, with interest; "tell me the tale. It ended happily, I know."

"It happened when I was five years old, and my sainted mother was yet alive. We were not then as rich as we are now, but prosperous. My father had a great ven-

ture, in which he had sunk not only all his substance, but borrowed money; coming from the Indies. It was to be shipped at Alexandria, and thither he went himself to act as supercargo. All went well. The caravan arrived safe, the goods were laden on board his vessel, and he set sail for home. After a few days he encountered contrary winds, and was at last becalmed off the coast of Tripoli, where the ship was attacked by Moorish pirates. Three galleys full of armed men grappled her. Her crew—outnumbered twenty to one—made a gallant resistance, but were soon overpowered. She was captured, taken possession of by the pirates, and my dear father, wounded as he was, removed to one of their galleys, and chained to the oar. At first they wished to kill him, for he had struck down one of their leaders, but this was the more cruel fate reserved for him.”

“Horrible!” said Cosmo, with a shudder. “And for how long did he endure such torture?”

“For five days only, thanks be to God! A storm separated the galleys from the ship, and drove that in which he was, out to sea. They were all but wrecked, with broken oars and split sails they lay at the mercy of the waves, which my poor father prayed might overwhelm and free him from his misery. Well, at dawn of the fifth day a ship passed close by—an English ship. The Moors made signs that they were in want of provisions, and the galley was taken alongside. ‘Is there any one on board,’ said the captain, ‘who can understand their tongue?’ There was none. ‘Can any of you speak a language that a Christian can comprehend?’ asked the captain again, after having consulted a tall, handsome man—apparently a passenger—who stood by his side. No answer. Then

the passenger made a like demand, first in French, and then, to my poor father's delight, in Italian. 'I can,' he cried. 'Oh, signor, these are pirates; they have taken my ship and chained me here. Help, help, for the love of God!' Although the Moors did not understand his words they saw their effect, and hastened to cast off the ropes which bound the galley to the ship, but in an instant that passenger was at my father's side, sword in hand, and at his call the English sailors came swarming down, and soon the tables were turned. The pirates were bound, and my father free. He had barely time to tell all that had happened, when he fainted from exhaustion and pain. His wound, his exposure to the cruel weather, and his agony of mind brought on a fever, through which his deliverer nursed him like a brother; and the first thing he heard when he regained consciousness was, that the gallant English, insti-

gated by that good man, had put back, intercepted his own vessel, and recaptured her."

"But he was no gainer by that," Cosmo observed.

"Our law gave him back one-third, and the English were quite contented with their share."

"I hope the passenger was richly rewarded?"

"He would not accept anything but some curiously carved iron-work—of no real value—there was on board; but he has his reward—the good God will bless him. His name is in my prayers morn and night."

"Tell me that name, carissima, that I, too, may honour it."

"HUGO DESMOND."

"Hast seen him, thou?"

"Once only, when—" she checked herself, and flushed crimson, "but that is a secret to be kept even from thee!"

“Have a care,” said her lover. “I may be jealous of this tall, handsome cavalier.”

“Foolish one! it was six years ago, when I was yet a child, and—well, I may tell thee this much—he has a wife whom he loves dearly.”

“Shall I see—shall I know him?”

“I think not: he lives a roving life. Join your prayers with mine, if you love me, Cosmo, that the blessed saints may have him in their care—him, and all dear to him. Thou dost pray, my Cosmo?”

“Sometimes,” replied the young noble, dryly.

“Ah, Cosmo! promise me thou wilt do so always.”

“Always!”

“Nay, thou knowest what I would. Promise that morn and eve, when I am kneeling to Heaven, I may know that thou also art seeking pardon and mercy amidst thy perils.”

“And a blessing for Hugo Desmond?” he asked, with a loving smile.

“Aye, dearest, and a blessing for Hugo Desmond.”

The merchant came bustling in as they were speaking, his jolly face one smile, but when he heard that name it suddenly became serious.

“What of Hugo Desmond?” he asked, almost severely.

“Marcellina was telling of thy escape from captivity, my good host, as a warning to me of the perils of the sea, and she bade me pray for thy brave deliverer.”

“Was that all?” said Bosco, turning to his daughter.

“My father, can you doubt——” she began.

“Enough,” he interrupted, in a low voice. “I know I can trust thee. My lord,” he said aloud, “there is not a man in all this world whom I revere—nay, love

—as I love Hugo Desmond. But for him this dear child would have been fatherless. I owe my life, my fortune, to him. I love all Englishmen for his sake. He is a man of men ; earnest, generous, brave. 'Twould do thee no harm to pray for such an one, or to find such an one at thy side in the hour of need. But what hast thou to do with the perils of the sea ?”

“I am bound for England, good Bosco. Thou must aid me, my friend, to find a ship.”

“That can I do right easily,” said the merchant. “One of mine own will sail in a few days, and, if it please thee, thou shalt have passage in her. But must thou leave us so soon ?”

“In good sooth I am pressed for time, but on my return——”

“’Tis well, thou knowest best thine own affairs, and ’tis a fair season for the voyage.”

“Say, my father,” asked Marcellina, “be there pirates now ?”

“A fig for pirates!” cried Bosco; “I am wiser than I was. The good ship *Venus* has teeth, my child; four goodly culverins that would sink them and their cursed galleys ere they could say *Marshallah*! Our fair guest shall sail in her, and—if his business detain him not too long—she shall await his return.”

“Thou art not a prince of merchants, as they call thee, but a king,” said Cosmo, pressing his hand. “A thousand thanks. I take thee at thy word. The time will come when it will be my joy to try and act as nobly by thee as thou dost to me this day.”

“My Lord Cosmo Ribolini,” said the merchant with dignity, “the service I offer you is but a small one; it is done in the due course of my business, and costs me nothing; but were it ten times greater it would not warrant what thou hast said. Thou hast deigned to speak as though we were equals; we are not, and can never be. Thou art a

noble—I, a trader. No service of mine can bridge over the gulf between us. The noblest conduct thou canst follow is to bear the existence of that gulf ever in thy mind.”

A rapid glance passed between the lovers, and each heart beat, “Can he suspect?”

He did not suspect, but he feared. He knew his daughter's character too well to entertain the common dread his order had of gay young nobles; and wild as Cosmo Ribolini was represented to be, there was that about him which satisfied his host that he would not abuse his hospitality, or he would not have welcomed him as he did. It is not your wild, harum-scarum rakes who are the most dangerous. These know the horrid depths to which a woman can be degraded, and shrink from leading her the first downward step. But there was unhappiness, long short of degradation, which might fall upon his only child. This

handsome Cosmo might win her heart in spite of herself, and, as he could not give her his hand, the careful parent was glad of the opportunity made by his too fervid expression of thanks, to warn them both as he did. His words, "*the noblest conduct thou canst follow is to bear the existence of that gulf ever in thy mind,*" sank deep into both their hearts.

Later on, when alone with Marcellina, he returned to the subject.

"The Count Ribolini is old, and, I hear, afflicted with an incurable malady, which may end his days at any moment. I marvel much that he should send his only son on so long a voyage. Did he tell thee what the business was?"

"No, nor did I ask him."

"Thou didst right. The affairs of these nobles are nought to us, my daughter. Mayhap it is some scheme of marriage."

A cold shudder passed through her, but she forced a smile and said—

“Are the ladies of Italy so ill-favoured that he need seek a bride in that cold island?”

“Such as the Ribolini do not *seek* their brides, my child; they are found for them. They marry to uphold and increase the family power. Beauty, or even love, has little part in their unions. We are more happy. Thou canst give thy heart with thy hand, my Marcellina; and thy old father is rich enough to let thee have thy choice—be he an honest man, and thy equal.”

She did not answer him, although there was a tone of interrogation in his last words; but changed the subject.

“Wilt thou not send some greeting to our benefactor?”

“No.”

“Father mine, should he by any means

learn that the Count Cosmo was our friend, and had left us empty-handed, he would deem it unkind, ungrateful."

"Not so."

"And his dear wife—that beautiful lady I saw but for a few moments, but shall always remember"—Marcellina persisted; "she would delight to hear from her country. I know I should if I lived in a foreign land."

"Marcellina, I conjure thee to say no more. Dearly as I love Hugo Desmond, I forbid thee to mention his name to any one, or to speak again of that—of that lady."

"Oh, father! is she not a good woman?"

"As good as the angels in heaven, but she is the cause of his being in deadly peril. Thou art of an age to understand such matters, and——well, it is good that thou shouldst know. That lady is of noble birth; I know not her name or her lineage. I did not ask, and I will not. Hugo would

have trusted me with the secret, but I bade him not. I might unwittingly have betrayed it and him. It rested with the priest who married them in this very house six years ago, and he is dead. Desmond, a man of the people, the son of a merchant like myself, mark you, my child—stole a noble maiden, and if her kin can ever find him they will slay him.”

“ Oh, horrible !”

“ ’Tis their law. They brook no unequal marriages with man or woman. I tell you again, if the father or the brothers of that lady can ever trace Hugo Desmond—God grant they never may !—he is a doomed man. No power can save him, no sanctuary protect him. Wherefore, my child, be prudent ; the very walls have ears. I love thee that thou bearest the name of this good man in reverence. Let it be between thee and thy God ; and, above all, not a word of the lady—not a word of the secret

marriage—only remember what I have said. Nobles who mate below them bring death as a marriage-portion.”

He left her stunned with this awful warning.

For the next three days she avoided meeting Cosmo, save in the presence of her father ; and her lover—lover-like—set down her sad silence to sorrow at their approaching separation, and her affectionate fears for his safety. To distract her thoughts, he assumed a gayness he was far from feeling, and this cut her to the heart.

“*He* must know,” she mused, “the fate his love has brought upon me. If I marry him, I die ; if I marry him not, I die. Oh, woe is me !”

Then she thought : “When his father is dead and he claims me, as he has promised, for his wife—who shall say him nay ? We might leave this land where

such cruel social laws prevail, and be happy elsewhere, as Hugo Desmond and his high-born bride doubtless are. He must have thought of this. But what afterwards? An exile, severed from country, home, friends; his rank and splendour lost, would not his heart sometimes grow cold to me as the cause? Better death than that. Should she give him back his troth?" Ardently as she loved him, she had not been lightly won. She had fought hard against her passion, but it had conquered her, become part of her, *was* her. Give him up? Better death than that. And so all her thoughts, her hopes, her fears, moved round in a circle, whose centre seemed to be a grave.

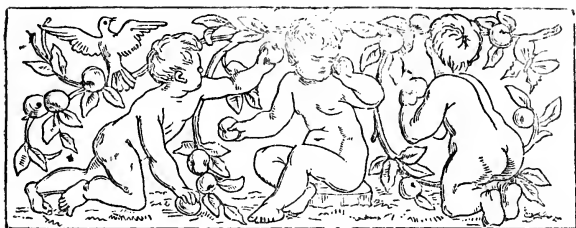
The sails of the good ship *Venus* had hardly paled away in the blue horizon, when a messenger arrived from Mantua, with a packet marked "haste;

post haste " for the Viscount Cosmo Ribolini.

What was the purport of that packet? Was it to recall the Count? Had the bearer no verbal message Bosco asked. The courier had no such message, only the packet. He knew nothing about it, only this—that the old lord had been found dead in his bed two days after his son had left him!

What was to be done? The *Venus* was one of the fastest ships of her day. There was no chance of overtaking her, and Cosmo had left no address where he might be found in England! There was no necessity, he said—he would return so soon—but the merchant had pressed upon him a letter of recommendation, and credit to his (Bosco's) correspondent, Martin Earle, the goldsmith of London. He would perhaps know how to communicate the news. Bosco went to the port and found that

another ship was loading, but would not sail for at least a month. Like a prince as he was, he took up the charter, and despatched her at once, half laden.



CHAPTER VI.

A FRIEND IN NEED.



MARTIN EARLE the goldsmith, lived at the sign of the "Crown" in Lombard Street—lived and carried on his business, as his father and his grandfather had done before him, in that same house. There also lived his "'prentices," until such time as they should set up in business for themselves, or join him in partnership, as industrious "'prentices" sometimes did. A sound, wealthy hard-headed man was Martin Earle, and a kind-hearted to boot. He had no care.

What banking business was done in those days belonged to the goldsmiths. They lent money, sold letters of credit and so on, in a safe old-fashioned way. There was no speculation, in our sense of the term, and little rivalry amongst them; for they had each his own customers at home and abroad, and in many cases his special connection with foreign parts in the enjoyment of which he was left undisturbed.

Thus, did your business call you to Paris or to the Indies, or had you a debt to recover at Smyrna or Madrid, you could find out without much trouble to whom you should apply for funds, information, or assistance. Martin Earle was a member of the company of merchants trading to the Levant, then not long incorporated, and had business of weight with Mediterranean ports.

He had two "prentices," but unfortu-

nately for them, no daughters for marriage. He was childless, but one of those "prentices"—his nephew—stood to him as a son, and was destined some day to inherit his wealth. Young Richard Earle was a cut above the ordinary "'prentice" lad of the period. He had been given more schooling than ordinarily came to their lot, and being spared much of the common drudgery of his class, had time to digest and add to what he had learned. Nevertheless, when "'prentices ! clubs !" was the cry in 'Cheap, this gallant was always foremost in the fray, and although the indulgence shown to him threw some extra work upon his fellow, John Eastman, they were the best of friends.

Dick Earle was a bit of a dandy, and lazy with hands and heels when there was no fighting going on. He had a fine capacity for looking on when hard work was to the fore, or ordinary customers to be served,

but let a lady come into the shop, there was no one like Dick to persuade her that she must have this buckle or chain, and beguile her of her broad pieces. It was customary with goldsmiths to send new or curious wares round to their patrons for inspection, and many a noble mansion had handsome Dick entered, not unsuccessfully, on such missions. Moreover, he was a scholar. Not only could he read and write English, but he had set himself to learn Italian—then, as now, the language of Levantine commerce—and by the time we make his acquaintance, was able to translate and answer the letters which his uncle and master received from abroad.

One fine July afternoon, there strolled into Lombard Street a young gentleman clad in raiment of a foreign cut, with that half-nervous, half-puzzled expression upon his face which the Briton who finds himself for the first time in a strange city may

see reflected in the plate glass windows. He had the idea that every one was watching him, and asking themselves what he wanted ; whereas, no one troubled himself about him. He went into several houses and quickly came out ; the puzzled and nervous look changing into one of vexation. He gave a fierce twist to his moustache, and then he laughed. What was the use of getting angry because people did not understand him. He crossed the road to where Martin Earle sat in the sunshine before his shop, and made as though he would speak to him, but the jolly John Bull face of the goldsmith did not seem to promise well, and he was in the act of passing on, when he pricked up his ears and stopped. What had he heard ? The *refrain* of an Italian boat song, rolled out in a pleasant tenor.

“ Pardon me, sir,” he said in the same tongue, “ but there is one——”

A roar of "Ho, Dick!" interrupted him, and out came the warbler.

"An Italian gentleman, Dick. Speak to him; speak him fairly, boy," said Martin Earle.

The stranger's face brightened at the sound of his own language, as that of a starving man who is welcomed to food.

"What could be done for His Excellency?"

His Excellency desired to find one Martin Earle.

"Why, that's me, *me*, ME," and the goldsmith giving to his own broad chest three digs, each one harder than the other, just as he emphasised the pronoun. Worthy man! He thought, as do many of his descendants, that if you speak bad grammar loudly, and gesticulate a little, foreigners are sure to understand you. And this foreigner did understand, and understanding him, addressed him, whereupon the

goldsmith scratched his head, and looked imploringly at Dick. More conversation in Italian ensued between the two who could speak it, in the course of which the one who could not, caught the name of Bosco.

“Not old Bartolomeo?” cried the latter. “Does he speak of my friend? Has he come from Bosco of Venice? Has he aught for me from Bosco? Quit thy grimacing, thou jackanapes!” (this to Dick), “and answer me.”

“Prythee, good uncle, interrupt us not. How can I tell thee till I hear myself?”

“Thou wilt learn nothing by bowing and scraping and waving thy cap, mala-pert! Ask him roundly cometh he from Bosco!”

Again the stranger appeared to understand. It is not the fashion to come straight to your point amongst his countrymen. Southern politeness requires a good deal

of beating about the bush, but the anxiety evinced by Martin Earle had its reward, and in a few minutes Master Dick was able to translate their visitor's business.

He had, indeed, come from Barlomeo Bosco, of Venice, and had a letter from that worthy to his friend, but unfortunately it was in his baggage, which was following him. He had landed about a week ago at Southampton, and was bound for Manchester, but had undergone so much trouble and delay on his journey through ignorance of English, that he had resolved not to go on alone. His object was to find this Martin Earle, to whom he had been recommended to apply in case of need, and ask him to provide a guide and interpreter. He had waited for his luggage to arrive until he was out of patience; indeed, he almost feared it was lost on the way, so he sallied out in quest of the man he relied upon, and lo! he had stumbled upon him

when about to give up the search in despair. Now if he had gone into any shop within half a mile, and simply said, "Martin Earle," he would have got the required information, but he doffed his plumed hat, and begged to be excused, and gave the "time of day," and compliments, all in an unknown tongue to those he addressed, by way of polite preliminary, and only got stared at for his pains. His dress, though of costly material, was travel-stained, and perhaps those good people thought he wanted something beyond information, and gave him the brusque "No, no, no; don't understand," which Britons, even in these enlightened times, will rap out when addressed, hat in hand, by foreigners of seedy appearance.

But his troubles were over now. Martin Earle would not even hear all that Dick had to translate. It was enough for him to know that his visitor came from Bosco.

He hustled him into the house, and roared out to have the great chamber prepared, and a meal spread instantly. It was part of his creed—and a good creed, too—that a traveller must be hungry—or thirsty, anyhow. In this case he was right. The money Cosmo Ribolini put in his purse when he left Southampton had been exhausted some days, and already the Drawers at his hostel in the Barbican had begun to mistrust a guest without a change of raiment, who ate and drank of the best. The goldsmith was delighted to see him do such justice to the viands set before him, and hear the contented “ha-a” with which he put down his first goblet of *Lacrimæ Christi*. To taste your own drink in a strange land is almost as good as hearing your own tongue. I, who write, am old enough to remember the days when the wandering Briton was not sure of his bitter beer abroad, and I have emitted just such an-

other "ha-a" as did the noble Cosmo—over the humble pewter as soon as possible after landing at St. Katharine's Wharf. It would have been all the more refreshing if it had been found under other skies, as was the bright liquor which went straight to the cockles of the young Mantuan's heart. He ate and drank his fill, Dick waiting upon him, and his host buzzing about like a great hospitable bumble-bee, and asking every moment "What sayeth he? what doth he need?" as though every sentence were a request. Then came further explanations.

Taking his cue from his worthy kinsman, Count Vincenti Della Torre, the elder Ribolini had ordered his son to take an assumed name on his travels, and this he had already done. Mine host of the "Gold Boar" knew him as Master Pietri, and Master Pietri he would have remained, but for this accident to his baggage.

Politeness required him to accept the letter of recommendation to Martin Earle which Bosco had offered, but he had no intention of using it. He did not want them to know in Venice that his mission was of such a character as to require a falsehood. Stern necessity obliged him to appear in his true colours, and the good goldsmith, who had taken him for a clerk, or a travelling agent at the best, was awe-struck when he found that he had entertained a viscount unawares.

“Gramercy!” he cried, “I’ve slapped him on the back, and he is a lord!”

The Italian’s mother wit turned this to good account.

“See now,” he said to Dick, “what a change has come over you all now you know my rank! It was much better at first, only I could not deceive you. Let it be as it was. I want to see your country in a familiar manner. I can do so much

better as a simple gentleman, than as a noble of Italy. I pray thee beg thy good uncle to forget what in honour I have told him, and let me be always Signor Pietri. My title as the friend of Bosco of Venice has served me so well, that I need no other."

There was nothing strange in men of rank travelling incognito, and so he was allowed to have his way. None but Dick, the interpreter, and his uncle, knew the secret. A change of linen was looked out for him, and Dick lent him a bran new suit, just out of the tailor's hands, and designed, no doubt, to destroy the peace of mind of Fleet Street belles.

Old Martin played his part pretty well except once, when—nothing having been heard for some days of the visitor's baggage—his housekeeper, careful woman! breathed fears that he might be an impostor. Then the cat was very nearly let out of the bag.

At last the errant valises turned up, whereat the goldsmith was delighted, but did not slap his guest on the back again.

In the meantime Dick—who did not stand much in awe of lords—took Cosmo (or Signor Pietri) about, and showed him the London of that day in style, with the assistance of the goldsmith's broad pieces. It was a rare time for Dick, and he made the most of it, you may be sure. The two became fast friends, and Master 'Prentice jumped at the idea of prolonging the enjoyment by becoming himself the guide and companion which the Italian sought.

"We will take our time," said the latter, "and have a pleasant journey. There are places of interest between this and Manchester?"

"Of a surety," Dick replied. "Why there's Oxford."

"I would fain visit that seat of learning."

"'Tis not on the direct road."

“No matter.”

“Then on the way back——” began Dick.

“I shall trouble thee no further than to Manchester,” the other interrupted. “I hope to find a countryman there who speaks English, and will relieve thee of thy burden.”

“It is no ‘burden,’ ” replied the ‘prentice; “but of course Your Excellency” (Dick liked to “excellency” him when they were alone) “will be glad to be once more with your own people and with your own class.”

“I am not so sure of that,” Cosmo said half to himself; “my own people and my own class impose things upon me which I would gladly escape. They impose things upon me in which thou, Ricardo mio, must not be mixed up.”

“I should not presume——” Dick began, apologetically.

“No, no, it is not that. I see what is

passing in thy mind. It is not what you think. I am not ashamed of thee, *altro!* I would call thee my friend before them all. Would to God they were half as honest and true as thou art; but—I cannot tell thee why thou must leave me in Manchester. Trust me that it is for thy good. Mayhap thou wilt hear something, and then——. Thou canst not understand my conduct, but promise that thou wilt not condemn it.”

“You speak as though you condemned it yourself,” replied honest Dick.

There was a tone of indecision and sorrow in his companion’s last address quite unnatural to him, and which Dick did not like.

“The Holy Virgin help me!” Cosmo moaned; “sometimes I do. Thou hast no father?”

“He died when I was a child, but my uncle——”

“Yes, yes, I know. Thou lovest him well. Uncles are not fathers though. If thy father lived, and he laid it upon thee to do a certain thing, thou wouldst obey, and do it?”

“If it were right.”

“He would be the judge of that.”

“Not so,” persisted sturdy Dick.

“How! Thou wouldst not venerate a father’s command?”

“Not if it were to do an ill deed.”

“If his blessing depended upon thy obedience?”

“The blessing of one who would so order is nothing worth.”

“Is *this* thy English faith?”

“Of a verity it is. Of what avail is a father’s blessing if it bring down the curse of God and the contempt of honest men?”

“Thou speakest safely, as thou hast no father.”

“My father was an honest man, and would not have laid upon me aught that was wrong, as—as——”

“Proceed. As mine has done, thou wouldst say. Tush ! Thou art an honest lad ; but meddle not with what thou canst not comprehend.”

It was the haughty Mantuan noble who spoke now, not Signor Pietri.

Dick flushed up too.

“Nay, I meddle not. Go thine own way. But,” he added, quickly, “if there be plotting against the king——”

“There is] not, on my soul—on my word there is not !” interrupted the other, warmly. “Have no fear ; there is nought that can implicate thee. Why, man ! I was but drawing thee out. Dost think that a Ribolini would lead any man, much less his son, from the path of honour ?”

Dick had not read of Machiavel’s famous inquiry as to the origin of evil, but he said

to himself, "There's a woman in this." And, indeed, there was that in Signor Pietri's manner—his absent thoughts, his forced gaiety at times, and his occasional fits of moody silence—which bore out the idea that he was a victim to the son of Venus. So the discussion above recorded did not remain long upon Dick's mind (nothing did), and they were as good friends afterwards as before.

The goldsmith was curious to know what was the purport of Cosmo's business in Lancashire, and asked Dick privately if he had any knowledge of it.

Dick had none, and told his master what their visitor had said about parting there.

"It is my belief," he concluded, "that the less we ask him about it the better he will be pleased."

"Oh, I seek not to meddle," said Martin Earle; "only, for Bosco's sake, I would do

all in my power for the gentleman. I was thinking that I might offer him a recommendation to my good friend Hugh Desmond, who lives there."

"Leave him to his own people, uncle mine," said Dick.

"Thou knowest Master Desmond?"

"Surely."

"Well, thou canst see him when thou hast discharged thy mission, and greet him for me."

There was only one person whom these arrangements did not suit, and that was John Eastman.

Dick had broken several people's heads for calling his fellow-'prentice "his dog." There was an implied sneer at John in this, which was lost upon its object, who was quite content to be his idol's "dog," in the sense of a creature who loved him and was faithful, and would fly at the throat of any one who attacked him.

“I’d sooner be Dick Earle’s dog than your master,” he would growl, in answer to the charge.

To find himself dethroned from his high estate, and, worse still, to see Dick become the “dog” of a foreign stranger, was gall and wormwood to John. He had the true ’prentice distrust and contempt for foreigners in general; and this one in particular filled him with suspicion.

John Eastman was no fool. He noticed that both Dick and his uncle treated the stranger, when they thought they were alone with him, with marked deference. They sought to “hedge,” so to speak, in this way for familiarities which they were obliged to use in public. There was that letter, too, from Bosco of Venice. Why had the goldsmith locked it up in his private drawer, instead of placing it with the rest of the correspondence?

“If I could only get that for an hour or


two, I should know something, though it is written in Italian."

What a power is jealousy? Nothing short of it could have made bluff John Eastman an eavesdropper, and a would-be purloiner of his master's keys.



CHAPTER VII.

“I HAVE THEE NOW, GOOD MASTER
DESMOND.”

 HAVE left Master Hugh Desmond too long under an accusation of having committed murder and buried his victim in the old brewhouse. His innocence is best proved by my stating at once, that the bones found by the constable and his men are not human relics at all. The one examined by Señor Porras showed (literally) the *cloven hoof*; but he smiled, and kept his own counsel.

Anything that would excite the people against Desmond was in his programme, and fearfully excited they were. Short shrift would he have had if they could have captured him there. But what did he want with a pile of ox bones? Simply this.—He was no mean chemist, and had found out for himself that the mode then in vogue for making phosphorus was complicated, slow, and nasty; and that nearly all afforded by materials (which shall be nameless) then in use, was to be gotten out of bones—but he did not succeed. The secret lay hid for a hundred and fifty years, and he was only blindly groping upon its track, as on that of the other great discovery which glimmered upon him in the explosion of that unholy flacon.

The black looks and murmurs which followed his unexpected appearance in the street, after the application of Dame Martha's Holy Water test, half amused, half

vexed him. How could they be so foolish! His experiment in presence of Master Symes showing how the explosion had been caused, though successful in one respect, failed in another. Symes shook his head, told him that no demonstration of the kind would remove the popular belief that he dealt with unholy arts, and prayed him, for the Lord's sake, to get him out of the town, and let the excitement blow over.

"Thou hast made an enemy of Master Willford," he added, "and he will leave no stone unturned to work thy ruin."

Now, Hugh Desmond had already determined to depart the next morning, so he was able to follow this good advice without any derangement of his plans. He left, with the consequences already described, and soon what he supposed to be a more pressing danger banished all thoughts of his Manchester persecutors

from his mind. That pretended beggar, with a scar on his face, whom "Sweet-heart" had fed at his gate, and unconsciously answered in her native tongue—troubled him.

As he was riding back from his last visit to his wife he had met that very man, well-dressed and well-mounted, and he had asked his way to Stafford. There might be several Italians tall and gaunt, and with scars on their faces, going about on business in no way connected with him; but a presentiment of evil which he could not throw off attached itself to this man.

Again and again he questioned his wife, and begged her to recall every detail respecting the object of her charity. Which way had he come—which way did he go? Had he seen the children? Had he spoken to anyone but herself? Had he asked her any questions?

She could not say which way he came. When first she saw him he was laying on the ground outside the gate. He had craved leave to stay there after his meal—he was so tired! She thought he did not leave till nightfall. Yes, he had asked her for her husband. How could he know she was married? How could she tell!

"Am I not old enough and pretty enough to be wedded?" she said; "and hast thou come back after so long to talk of nothing but a wretched mendicant? Talk to me of thy dear self. What hast been doing? Where hast thou been!"

He returned her caresses, but answered not. The dread that had vaguely haunted him since their flight took a fixed form and made him shudder in her arms. Suddenly he said—

"We must leave this place, Maria."

"*We!* Ah, that is good," she cried, looking up from his breast into his troubled face,

undisturbed by its gloom. “We—then we shall go together?”

“Yes, dear one, together.”

The sweet face was nestled again on his breast, quite contented.

“Thou dost not ask whither?” he said.

“What matters whither, so thou be there?”

“We will go to London. There is safety in a crowd. In that busy city none will notice us.” This musing to himself. “When could’st be ready for the journey?”

“To-morrow, nay, in two hours if it please thee, but——”

“Well?”

“Hast noted that little Hugo is looking pale? Is’t a long journey to London?”

“For thee, and the little ones—yes.”

“’Tis nothing. The child has been pining for thee. ’Twill pass now thou art here.”

But the father's kiss was not so potent a remedy as Sweetheart hoped. Little Hugh was really ill, became worse, and for a time his life hung upon a thread. There was no going to London for a long time yet.

One day, when the father had ridden in to Stafford for some medicines for his child, he was surprised to hear his name called after him in the street. He turned, and a smart young fellow in riding-dress came up much out of breath.

"Gramercy, how you walk, Master Desmond!" he panted. "Dost thou not remember me? I am Dick Earle, nephew of Martin Earle, the goldsmith, at whose house thou lodged last year, in London."

"Remember thee! That do I well. How is it with thy worthy uncle? And what doeth thou here?"

"Oh, uncle is hearty, as usual. He often speaks of thee, Master Desmond. By the

way, that reminds me, he heard lately from thy friend Signor Bosco, of Venice."

"Ha," said Hugh, a cloud passing over his brow ; " what of Bosco ?"

" He, too, is well and prosperous. His ship, the *Venus*, has arrived at Southampton, with a rich cargo of silks, and _____"

Here Dick checked himself ; his tongue loosened, as young tongues will be, by the unexpected sight of a pleasant acquaintance, was running away with him.

" And thou art travelling on his business, I warrant me," said Desmond.

" Not exactly," Dick replied somewhat drily.

They sauntered on towards the hostel where Desmond had left his horse, and at the door thereof found two steeds saddled as for a journey, and a third bearing baggage, in charge of a groom. Beside one of the former, booted and

spurred, and looking impatient, stood Signor Pietri.

"Well, keep thine own counsel," Desmond replied. "'Twas but an idle question."

"Nay, nay, Master Desmond, there is no secret," said Dick. "I am but acting as guide to this gentleman who speaks not English, and has business in the North."

He indicated Signor Pietri with a wave of the hand, and instinctively the two raised their hats. They had been both abroad, you know, and did not glare at each other in proper British form.

"God speed thee, my boy; a happy journey and a safe return," said Desmond. "And when thou seest thy good uncle, fail not to tell him thou didst meet with Hugh Desmond, and give him warm greeting from me."

Signor Pietri's foot was in the stirrup, but at the sound of that name he withdrew

it, and with a flush of pleasure and surprise whispered a question in Dick's ear.

"The same," replied the 'prentice ; "but caution—caution !"

"Fear not," said the Italian in an undertone. Then, turning to Hugh, he bowed till the plume of his hat swept the ground, and thus greeted him in his own language.

"Signor Desmond, this is an honour which I had hoped for, but little expected. I have heard of thee in my own country. Bosco of Venice is my friend, and the Signorina——Oh, sir ! after the holy saints, your name is held most sacred by her. It was she who told me of your noble rescue of her father, with smiles and tears of gratitude. Nay, I must speak. I know you English are unemotional—that you love not open praise. Then I will say no more of your noble acts. I plead for myself. Give me the happiness, the honour of kissing that good, that valiant hand, as thy friend."

He would have knelt to kiss that hard, brown hand, if Hugh had not prevented him. With the sound of the name he had heard pronounced with so much love, in the soft Venetian twilight, by the lips that were the sweetest in the world to him, came a vision—momentary, but soul-inspiring—of the beautiful grave face of his darling. Thus inspired, his warm southern nature burst out, and swept away all thought of caution.

No such inspiration helped Hugh Desmond to receive this ovation. For him, Marcellina Bosco was a shy little girl, standing between her father's knees, and fidgeting with the packet of *confiti* he had given her. That little affair with the pirates was a drop in the ocean of *his* experiences. He had almost forgotten all about it.

"Was that wisely done, most illustrious?" expostulated Dick as they rode away.

"Perhaps not," Signor Pietri replied

“ ’twas an impulse. I could not help myself. If thou hadst heard——bah! you cold-blooded islanders cannot understand. Yet I did in no wise commit myself, most prudent sir. I am a friend of his friend, that is all.”

“ He lives in Manchester, and may encounter thee there.”

“ No matter,” said Cosmo.

Then Dick was told the story of Bosco’s capture by pirates, and his rescue by Hugh Desmond, of which the ’prentice had not heard. He only knew that Desmond had led a wandering, eventful life, and had rendered some valuable service to the merchant, by whom he had been introduced (much as Cosmo had been) to Martin Earle. The narrator was still under the spell, and did full justice to his hero. In conclusion he said, “ It is an honour to know such a man. That! for his birth, or what he may have done before that noble

action or since, one who could act as he did must be a gentleman."

"And capable of understanding generous emotions," Dick observed dryly, "though he is a cold-blooded islander."

"A fair hit," laughed Signor Pietri; "thou hast me there."

Things having gone so far, Dick narrated what had passed between him and his uncle, the goldsmith, respecting an introduction to this same Master Desmond.

"And why didst stay him?" asked the Italian half angrily.

"Shall I tell thee the plain truth?"

"Speak candidly."

"Because thou hast been silent—moodily silent—on all that pertains to thy object in visiting Manchester. Because if it pleased thee to know any there, thou couldst have asked my uncle for such an introduction, and because I would not have him offer what might displease thee—that is the plain truth."

“All of it?”

“Well, thou toldest me thou hadst friends there, and I said, ‘Leave him to his own people.’”

Cosmo ground his teeth, and made no answer for some time. “Thou wast right,” he said at last; “leave me to mine own people——when I find them, but till then, good Dick, let us enjoy ourselves.” And on they rode merrily.

“We shall be in Manchester to-morrow, at this rate,” said Dick; but they were not destined to see that town. They were crossing a piece of heath as he spoke, around which the road curved. A fine piece of galloping ground to all appearance, but as the words passed his lips, Cosmo’s horse put his foot into a rabbit hole, stumbled and fell upon its rider, crushing him woefully.

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As Desmond passed through the avenue of limes which led to his house, night had set in, but Maria ran out to meet him with that upon her face which made his heart give a great leap, and brought the cry, "My God! the child?" to his lips.

"Is well—is better, I think," she said; "but oh, Hugo! that beggar man! He has been here again."

"And spoke to thee?" he asked, dismounting, and throwing his arms around her.

"No, not to me—to another—thanks be to heaven thou hast come! My head ached with watching, I suppose, and little Hugo slept, so I came out for the fresh air, and sat down yonder by those shrubs which hide the garden from the road. I was tired and slept—not for long. The sound of horses hoofs awoke me. At first I thought it was thee, and hid to surprise thee as thou passed; but it was the beggar man, Hugo, and another, whose face I could

not see, and they halted within a few yards of where I crouched, and spoke of thee, my darling. My darling, they seek to do thee evil."

"Be composed, sweetheart, be brave; tell me all they said."

"I will try," she said, dashing away her tears. "He—the beggar—was dressed like a serving man; but the other called him cousin."

"They spoke Italian?"

"Of course. I did not catch the first words of the one with the scar, but his companion replied, 'Certes, it is he! Once thou hadst found the nest, 'twas but a matter of time to catch the male bird in it. The discoveries I made in his laboratory at Manchester were all but conclusive, and now that we have tracked him here, there is no room for doubt. I have thee now, good Master Desmond.' Oh, my Hugo! there was murder in his tone."

"Go on, go on—the rest?"

"Then the beggar, or he that——"

"I understand; go on."

"Said, 'What is to be done? Will you act now?' And the other replied, 'I cannot till I have received an answer from Mantua.' Do you mark me, Hugo?—from Mantua!"

Desmond groaned, and held her tighter in his arms.

"'In the meantime, the bird may fly,' said the beggar. 'Not so,' replied the other; 'he dare not go back to Manchester, and has no suspicion that we have discovered him. No, no; he will stay here, and is as much in my power as though I had my heel on his throat and my dagger at his heart.' Those were his very words."

"Did aught else pass between them?"

"The beggar said, 'Well, it is thy business, not mine; if it were, I should make

sure at once.' Then the other fell to musing, and said, after a pause, 'I am half sorry that I wrote as I did, though it seemed for the best at the time; but, having done so, I must needs bide the issue. How long is't since thou wert here the first time?' 'Nearly four months,' was the reply. 'Let us hasten back now thou art convinced; for the answer from Mantua may come any day now,' said his companion; and with that they turned their horses' heads and rode away. Oh, Hugo, Hugo! What does it mean?"

He told her—there was no help for it now—he told her all he had dreaded, and showed how well-founded were his fears.

"I have brought a curse upon him," she moaned. "Woe is me! I have brought a curse upon my love!"

She besought him to fly, and leave her and the children.

"They will not hurt us," she said.

But he knew better.

"We will all away together, Sweetheart," he replied, in as gay a voice as he could assume. "Grant that the answer they expect has already arrived, they cannot be back here in less than three days; and to-morrow, please God, little Hugh will be well enough to travel on my knee."

"They will hunt us wherever we go," sobbed his wife.

"Hunted creatures will turn at bay," said the old Buccaneer, with a flash in his eyes which boded no good to the hunters.

He had already formed his plan. He would remove his dear ones from immediate danger, and then carry the war into the enemies' country. He would face that bloodthirsty pair on their return, and quench the last spark of danger in their blood. A narrow road, a dark night, a sudden shot for the one and equal steel

with his chief, and Sweetheart might sleep in peace.

In peace, and he away, with no one to protect her ! More careful consideration conjured up a score of possible perils. He might miss his foes ; they might pass him, and track him whilst he was seeking them. Was there no one he could rely upon to stand by her and help him ? Yes, there was. Stout Gregory Denys—the very man ! But how reach Gregory ?

“ Well, there is a way for that,” mused Hugh Desmond, “ if gratitude lives deeper than in words.”

He had just then but one servant. The old woman who had taken the place of the defunct Bertha had left a day or two ago, and, for the moment, could not be replaced. A youth whom he had picked up, friendless and starving, some years ago, in the streets of Smyrna, sufficed. This unfortunate had run away to sea when almost a

child ; had joined in a sailor's frolic in that distant port, got lost, missed his ship, and was left to the tender mercies of the Turks. Small store of education had he, but a power of mother wit. He had a vague idea that there was some sort of a God in heaven, though he put his trust chiefly in one he had made for himself on earth—Hugh Desmond. He was now about sixteen years of age, a slip of a boy, but hardy as a young oak-tree, and faithful as a dog.

When Sweetheart had retired to rest, her lord descended to the outer regions, and woke this boy.

"Art awake, Tom?"

"Aye, master."

"Canst ride to Manchester, my lad?"

"Aye, master."

"Canst be discreet ; do what thou'rt told, and hold thy tongue?"

"I'll do thy will, and say naught," Tom replied.

The word "discreet" bothered him. He was not sure if he could do that.

"Dost know the road?"

"I'll find it somehow."

"Ask thy way as little as thou canst help, and ride as fast as my horse will carry thee. Start at daybreak; seek out Gregory Denys at my house (thou knowest where), give him this ring for a token, and bid him take horse and follow thee."

"Back here, master?"

"No. To the old mill at Morton-of-the King, where we stayed awhile on our way here."

"Where you shot the mallards, master?"

"Right. But pass not this way. Go by the ford at the Hallowfield. The money thou wilt want is in this belt; strap it round thee, and put my smaller pistols in thy holsters—they are loaded. And, mark me, Tom, if thou shouldst see two foreigners on the road—one a tall, dark

man, with a scar on his cheek—keep out of their view, and pass them, if possible ; but if thou *shouldst* meet them at a halting-place, and their horses should go lame, or get loose, or anything else happen by *accident*—dost mark me, Tom, by accident?—to hinder them on their journey without delaying thee—why, I do not think that any honest man would be sorry."

No magpie gloating over a stolen sixpence could look more cunning than did Tom ; but he only answered, "Aye, master," as usual.

The first faint streaks of dawn had hardly appeared, when the clatter of hoofs told Desmond that his messenger was on his way. He had not closed his eyes that night, and still laid awake to think. Those unwelcome visitors had left about four o'clock on the previous day, and their horses—so Sweetheart told him, in reply

to further questions—appeared tired. Their halting-place would probably be a small village about ten miles on ; but rather out of their way. Even if they started again the same time with Tom, the fine horse he rode, lightly weighted, would pick up their jaded steeds. Tom would beat them full six hours into Manchester, though no “accident” happened, and would be back with the stout young smith in time.

A movement of the sick child disturbed his reverie.

“Art in pain, my boy?”

“No, papa ; only thirsty.”

He took his little hand ; it was cool and moist.

“Thank God !” he said fervently, as, having sipped the drink prepared for him, little Hugh turned upon his pillow, and lapsed again into a healthy sleep.

Then the whilom Buccaneer, who oft had scoffed at priests and churches, fell on his

knees and prayed. No well-worn formula of supplication—nothing but the cry of his heart for help and strength to protect these helpless dear ones.

Away sped Tom Stevens, pleased with himself, and proud of his mission, till he came to a heath, round which the road wound. There was a track across it, by following which he could save half a mile, so he took it.

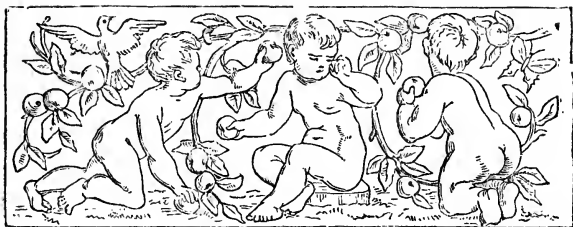
"Holloa!" he said to himself as he was about half over, "there's been a scuffle here." And indeed the ground cut up by marks of horses' hoofs and riders' boots bore out his idea.

He passed on, and regained the road, but it forked into three, and he did not know which to take. Well, there was a hovel hard by where some one lived, and was getting his breakfast, to judge by the smoke which curled out of the half-opened

door. He would ask. He rode up, knocked loudly with his whip, and shouted with the air born of his good mount, the gold in his belt, and pistols in his holsters—

“Ho ! within there ; which of these roads is right for Manchester ?”

“ Manchester !” repeated a voice. “ Who rides to Manchester ?” and a young man clad in a smart dress came quickly out of that wretched-looking abode, and laid his hand on Tom’s bridle.



CHAPTER VIII.

ON THE ROAD.



TARTLED by so unexpected an apparition, Tom reined back his horse, and drew a pistol.

“Put up thy weapon, thou popinjay! I mean thee no harm. Dost take me for a cut-purse? There. A noble beast, by my life! Put up thy weapon. See, I bear no arms. I am a peaceful traveller like thyself, and will direct thee on thy way with truth and courtesy an thou wilt let me. Thou art for Manchester?”

“What is that to thee?”

“Fair words, good youth. Having asked the way, ’tis useless to deny that that is thy destination.”

“And what if it be?”

“Much. There has been a sad mishap near this. My companion’s horse fell, and rolled upon him. He is hurt grievously. If thou doubttest me, come in and see for thyself. He, too, is bound for Manchester, where he has friends, and would fain communicate to them his state, and have some leech sent to tend his hurts. Wait but ten minutes whilst I write a letter, take it for me, and thou wilt not only do a good deed, but shall be rewarded liberally.”

Tom wavered. Ten minutes was not much to wait, and he was a kind-hearted lad.

“Who art thou?” he asked.

“My name is Richard Earle, of London; my friend is a foreign gentleman, Signor Pietri.”

Tom pricked up his ears. A foreigner! His master had spoken of two journeying together, but this might be one of them. It would be worth his while to see if the disabled man had a scar on his face, and if so, to be able to report that the wished-for *accident* had happened. More. If it were truly he, that letter for his friends in Manchester might be consigned to the nearest pond, or, better still, carried to Hugh Desmond, and so a further delay ensured. Tom had his wits about him you see.

So he went in, and whilst our friend Dick was writing under difficulties which somewhat marred the effect of his penmanship, took careful stock of his companion, who lay groaning on a heap of straw. No. He was not particularly tall, his complexion was fair, and his cheek unscarred.

Honest Tom felt quite sorry for him, and the thought of directing them to his

master's house for help came more than once into his mind. He looked around for the owner of the hovel, and there he was in the corner munching a crust of rye bread, and stirring a pot, whose steam suggested the presence of rabbits (not unconnected with onions) in a satisfactory manner to any one who—like Tom—had had more riding than breakfast that morning. He thought he had seen that man before, when and where he could not remember. He spoke to him, but was no way the wiser for his questions. The fellow was either sulky or stupid. Tom could make nothing out of him—except a breakfast. He had to breakfast somewhere.

Nor had 'prentice Dick—sharp as he was—been more successful with his host, who was really not sulky, but densely, impregnably stupid. Was there any town nearer than Stafford? He did not know.

Any country houses about? He did not know. Did he know of any leech? The faintest gleam of intelligence flicked for a moment on his usually vacant face, and disappeared as he shook his head. How long had he lived there? He could not say—since he was a boy. And never went abroad! Never.

“What a life!” thought Dick. “Enough to make an idiot of any one.”

It was the life led by many in those “good old days.” The father of this hoveller had “squatted” on the heath and lived (or starved) by selling turf, and osiers for basket-making in Stafford. Sometimes there was a rabbit or two hid away in these consignments, unknown to the lord of the manor. The son was content to follow in his sire’s steps. He could not have told for his life what king reigned in England, or what day of the week it was. Would he go into Stafford and fetch a

doctor? No. He could not walk so far. He was all to pieces with the "shakes." How then did he send his goods to market? On the donkey. Where was the donkey? Gone there. Where was "there?" Why to Stafford, to be sure. What, alone! No, the wife was with him.

This was the first mention of his help-mate, and Dick took heart. Much was not to be expected of a woman who could link herself to such a life, but there was comfort in the reflection that she could not possibly be *more* dense than her lord.

Sharp as he was, Dick's mind could not apply itself to two things at a time. So intent was he upon writing that letter for Signor Pietri, and getting Tom Stevens to take it, that he forgot to ask the latter any of the questions he had put in vain to the hoveller, and thought he had done very well when he saw Tom ride away with the missive in his belt. He was

barely out of sight when the donkey—
bestriden male fashion by a pleasant-
looking woman — trotted up to the
door.

* * * *

The road was good, and the weather
cloudy, so Tom galloped along and nothing
happened worthy of particular mention (as
run the Marine protests) until evening,
when the rain which had been threatening
all day, came down as though it too had
to make up for lost time, and he rode his
last eight miles through a first class
thunder-storm. He had followed his
orders, and his good chestnut was not sorry
to see houses and lights, and to hear
sounds suggestive of corn and a stable.
He gave a little satisfied winney, as horses
will do under the circumstances, and
pricked up his ears.

“Dost think thou’rt going to see thy
master, old fellow?” said Tom, who was in

the habit of conversing with his charge, "never fear."

This was intended as an assurance that one of his master's sayings, "the first duty of a good traveller is to his beast," was not forgotten. As soon as Hugh Desmond had kissed wife and children, on his return to home, he would follow Hafid to his stall, see him rubbed down, and feed him with his own hand. Tom had no sweetheart to kiss, so he led his tired steed straight through the hostel yard to where the instinct of his class judged the stable would be. There he saw two horses wet, muddy, jaded and supperless—who turned their heads and watched him with wistful eyes, poor beasts! as he passed.

"If my master was thine, I wouldn't be the varlet who leaves thee thus," thought Tom.

Then he unsaddled Hafid, washed his legs and mouth, rubbed him dry, fastened

him up by the side of his less fortunate brethren, and went off in search of Will Ostler and corn.

"Art not ashamed to treat good dumb cattle thus?" expostulated Desmond's disciple, when he had found that functionary, and returned with him to the stable.

"I had no orders," replied the ostler gruffly.

"To the devil with 'orders!' Hast no sense? I warrant me thou waitest for no orders to get thine own supper."

"What is't to thee! Art their servant?"

"Whose?"

"Why the two foreigners who came in lately."

"Ho, ho, so two foreigners came in lately, did they?"

The ostler nodded.

"And these are their horses, eh?"

He nodded again.

"Well, it's no affair of mine ; I'm not their man. Where is the corn ?"

"Hie thee, and dry thy clothes, I'll feed the horse," said the man.

"Not so. Give me the corn, if thou wouldst not be worried like a rat by a dog."

"Oh ! he bites, does he ?"

"Awful !" replied the unvaracious Tom. "There's a poor young man down in Staffordshire — but he was too venturesome, and no one was near to warn him."

"Take thy corn," said the ostler quickly, "and tend thy wild beast thyself. I mistrusted his eye from the first."

Now Hafid, like all of his blood, had a remarkably kind and soft eye. Having settled him for the night, Tom returned to the hostel, ordered supper, and proceeded to dry himself (for he had no change) before a huge log fire, which was blazing in the guests' room. He was not

the only one so engaged. The masters of those two horses stood there steaming away, and occasionally cursing somebody or something in a tongue unknown to Tom. There was no mistake now. They were undoubtedly *the* pair to whom an *accident* might happen without causing sorrow to any honest man. Tom thought of the neglected steeds, and wished he had not befriended them.

“A foul night!” said the elder of the two (not he with the scarred face) as he made way for Tom at the fire. “Thou also wert caught in the storm it would seem. Hast ridden far?”

“No, not very,” Tom replied carelessly, tugging the while at a boot which stuck like a sucker, and in fact *was* one, till he had stamped the water out of it.

“Art journeying north or south?”

“Neither,” said Tom.

“Pardon my questions. The varlet

with our sumpter horse has missed us, and we are sorely put to it for a change of raiment. I thought that perchance thou mightest have seen him on thy road."

"I passed him not," Tom replied, after a moment's consideration as to whether it would not be well to send them out on some wild goose chase after the missing domestic; "but the night is black as a wolf's mouth," he added, "and the rain blinding. Peradventure, he has lost his way."

"Very like. 'Tis an addle-pated knave."

By this time Tom had got his boots off, and his doublet, and was engaged drying the former by pouring hot ashes into them, and shaking them about.

The foreigners made a remark, in which Tom caught something like the word "ingenious."

"Call it what you please," he said, "but do you think to put on yours again, you

will do the like. Oh Lord, the letter!" with which exclamation he sprung at his doublet, which lay on the floor, exuding several small rills, and drew forth that missive in a decidedly pulpy condition.

Dick Earle had been short of paper. It was only half a sheet folded, and it opened of itself as Tom placed it—address uppermost as luck would have it—to dry on the hearth. This was an operation which required some care and time ; and he did not perceive that the tall man with the scar on his cheek was stooping over him the while. When the paper was dry, and he had refolded it, he saw that his fellow guests had retired to the other end of the room, and were deep in conversation. Well, they were dry by this time, and the fire was perhaps oppressively hot. Tom himself was glad to move away when the welcome word *supper* was pronounced. Alas ! it was not his supper, he was told. First

come, first serve—was the rule of that house. The drawer was not sure that they *could* get two suppers; whereupon the elder of the travellers laughed at Tom's look of dismay, and courteously invited him to join them at their repast.

They were very hospitable—particularly with the wine, which the tall man pressed on Tom with many words and gestures of good-will; but Tom would none of it.

“Draw me a stoup of ale,” he said, and threw down his broad piece like a prince.

“Thou hast a long ride yet before thee to Manchester,” observed the spokesman.

“Anon!” said Tom.

“And it is ill-weather for thy journey?”

“The rain is all but over now.”

“Frankly; thou bearest a letter for Señor Porras?”

“Frankly; thou art a knave to know it,” cried Tom, starting up.

“Tut, tut! I saw but the superscrip-

tion, and no one had a better right to read it, for I am the person to whom it is addressed."

"Thou art, of a truth, Señor Vincenti Porras?"

"In good sooth I am. This gentleman will tell thee so."

The other nodded, and said, "Yaes, yaes."

"Hum! And thy name is——?"

"Marco."

"There! Thou seest thou canst finish thy errand here."

"By delivering thee this letter?"

"Precisely."

"Vastly good!" said Tom, reseating himself, and making a second onslaught upon the pastry. "Vastly good! Now listen, worthy Señor Vincenti Porras, and thou, worshipful Master Marco Something—quit thy scowling, for 'twill naught avail. When the gentleman who wrote this letter gave

it into my hands, he read to me the superscription—as thou callest it—and if I recollect aright, it is for Señor Vincenti Porras, at the Golden Boar, in Deansgate.”

“That is precisely where I lodge.”

“Then when I see thee *at* the Golden Boar in Deansgate, thou shalt have thy letter, but not an hour before,” and he raised his stoup of ale to his lips, and saw the bottom of it before he put it down.

The tall man muttered something which, to judge by the expression of his eyes, was not favourable to Tom ; but the other laid his hand upon his sleeve and checked him.

“Thou art a trusty youth,” he said, warmly. “I like thee the better for thy refusal. We will ride on together in the morning, and thou shalt not relinquish thy charge till thou art certain that it falls into the right hands. Mayhap it doth not press.”

“Don’t it !” thought Tom ; and then an idea flashed into his head.

“But thou mayest at least tell me who sent thee?” insinuated Señor Porras.

“Richard Earle, of London.”

“I know him not.”

“Mayhap. He wrote not for himself, but his companion, a young gentleman of Italy, who had met with a sore mischance.”

“Ha! How so?”

“His horse fell, and rolled over him. They were on their way to Manchester, and sent me on to thee—if, indeed, thou art this Señor Porras—for help.”

The two foreigners exchanged rapid glances. Marco, who did not understand a word of what was passing, seemed impatient.

“I will tell thee all presently,” the other whispered in Italian. “Leave him to me.”

“Poor gentleman! A countryman, I dare say, who had heard of me. Canst describe him?”

“A fair man, with large grey eyes; well-favoured, too, when well, I’ll be sworn, but fearsomely pale when I saw him.”

“Did this—I forget me his name—he who wrote, call him by his name?”

“Well, yes, he did.”

“What was it?”

“I cannot rightly say; they spoke Italian, I suppose. Something like Illust—Illustriss. I know not.”

“Illustrissimo?”

“That was it—Illustrissimo.”

“Now, bethink thee, good youth, were it not a charity to give me that letter, so that I may go at once to the aid of the poor gentleman?”

“No,” said Tom, stoutly, “I have told thee enough, an thou art *really* the man he seeks, to send thee to his side. If after this thou goest not, ’tis proof thou art not Señor Vincenti Porras, and that I must seek him in Manchester. If I give him

the letter," mused cunning Tom, "he might mistrust it and me."

"Wilt guide us back to where he is?" Porras asked, after a pause.

"An you will."

"Good ; we will start at daybreak."

"Softly, softly, good señor. I did not tell thee that my only business was to deliver that letter ; but if thou wilt wait here till my return——"

Porras interrupted him with a gesture of impatience.

"Where did you leave these travellers?" he asked.

Tom told him, and was very particular in indicating the road. Then he went out again to the stable, to see if Hafid were all right, and to get his holsters.

"I tell thee, cousin," said Marco, when they were alone, and Tom's story had been translated, "I would have had that letter,

though it cost him a stab. Leave him to me."

"Of what avail is the paper when we know its contents?"

"There may be more than he says; there may be some trick."

"No," said the other, after a pause; "the boy is honest. There is no trick. If there were, he would have given me the letter."

"It may not be our kinsman who is hurt, after all."

"Bah! Who else can it be? Who else coming from abroad knows me as Vincenti Porras? The guide, or whatever the man who writes may be, called him 'Illustrissimo,' which yon simpleton took to be his name. 'Tis Cosmo de Ribolini—none other."

"Then the end is nearer than we thought."

"Much nearer."

He of the addle pate arrived with the

baggage soon after midnight, and Tom, who was sleeping with one eye open, heard the orders he received. He was to hire fresh horses to go *back* in the morning, and find a doctor to bear his masters company.

"That settles it," Tom said to himself; and taking a long nail, which he had sharpened, from his pocket, he threw it out of window. "A good twelve hours lost, and no harm done to any dumb beast."

Poor, faithful Tom! He little thought that what he had done might *gain* them two days.



CHAPTER IX.

HOW TOM STEVENS LIED FOR HIS MASTER.



TOM STEVENS had only once accompanied his master to Manchester, and consequently knew not exactly the way to his house. Hafid was wiser, and took him thither straight.

“Mother of mercies!” cried Dame Martha, as she saw them enter the yard. “*Another!* and on his own horse too !”

Then she volunteered the information that Master Desmond was not in town. She could not say where he had gone, or

when he would return. It was no use asking any questions ; she knew nothing.

All this very volubly, in a half-frightened, half-defiant tone, and without the least provocation from Tom.

“ Who asked for Master Desmond ? ” he said, as he dismounted. “ An he hath gone to the devil, and means to stay, it is no business of mine, I seek one Gregory Denys.”

“ My son ! ” moaned the good dame, crossing herself. “ Oh, what hath he done ? ”

“ Nay, I am not his godfather,” replied pert Tom, loosing Hafid’s girths. “ I pray thee send him hither, if he be in the house.”

The doors of the old brewhouse opened as he spoke, and Gregory himself appeared, hammer in hand as usual. His employer had left him some heavy work to finish, and he was busy.

“Who asks for me?”

“I do—if thou art Gregory Denys.”

“I know thee not,” said the smith. Since that affair of the purse he had grown suspicious of strangers.

“Hist!” Tom whispered, lowering his head and putting Hafid between them and Dame Martha, who stood on the steps leading into the house in an agony of suspense. “Hist! come nearer. Dost know this horse?”

“’Tis my master’s.”

“And this ring?”

“His also.”

“Come with me to the stable, and I will show thee more. Why, man,” he cried aloud, “must this good nag have no corn after his journey, or shall I take him to an inn?”

“Follow me,” said the smith. “Get thee in, mother; I will join thee anon. Now,” turning upon Tom, as soon as the

stable-door had closed behind them, "thy will with me?"

But Tom, true to his teaching, rubbed down Hafid and fed him before he would say a word. This done—he sat him down upon the corn bin, and began.

"Thou hast recognised thy master's ring. Good! It was his token for thee to obey his orders by my mouth."

"And they are?"

"To take horse and follow me."

"But——"

"But me no buts. Master Desmond is in some straight. Nay, I know not what; I did but guess by his face that there is something amiss. Mayhap I am wrong to say as much, but he is my master as well as thine, and I love him."

"I would lay down my life to serve him."

"Good again. Then get thee a horse,

and prepare to follow me, as soon as Hafid has rested."

"Whither, boy, whither? I must——"

"Hadst thou as much trust in him as he has in thee, thou wouldst not ask 'whither.' 'Get thee to Manchester, see Gregory Denys, give him this ring, and bid him take horse and follow thee.' Those were his words. And thou hadst come with such to me, I would have asked no *whither*."

"Master Desmond has enemies," mused the half-convinced smith.

"The more reason that his friends should be true."

"I know my duty, and will not be taught by thee, thou jackanapes!"

"Then do it," said Tom, "and no more words about it."

"Let me see that ring again."

"Take it and the money, too. Thou art the elder, and 'tis meet thou shouldst bear the purse. Good Master Gregory, forgive

me if I have said aught to offend thee, but do thy duty, and," he added more seriously, "hold thy tongue, as he bade me do."

"What *can* I say, except that I am going to my master?"

"Thou must not say even so much."

"If I follow thee, who comest from him, the folk will know."

"Leave that to me. Knowest thou the Golden Boar, in Deansgate?"

"Aye."

"Then lead me there."

"What is thy name?"

"Tom Stevens."

"How long hast served my master?"

"Nine years."

"Then give me thy hand, Tom Stevens, Thou art a smart youth, and *must* be loyal."

They went together to the Golden Boar, and mine host's first words as Tom asked for Señor Porras, were almost an echo of Dame Martha's greeting,—

“What! *Another*. Gramercy! this Señor must be a great man to have two messengers after him in one day. Art also from London?”

“Anon!” said Tom, looking as stupid as he could.

“He was at our house an hour ago, with a letter for Master Desmond,” Gregory whispered.

“In God’s name, who?”

“Why, the other messenger to be sure.”

“Oh, there is another messenger! Came he through Macclesfield?” asked Tom.

“Here he is, to answer for himself,” said Gregory; “dost know him?”

“No. Give you good day, fair gentleman,” said Tom, bowing politely to the person indicated. “Thou also, it would seem, hast business with Señor Porras?”

We have met that other messenger before. It was no other than John Eastman

who joined them in the porch, sent by mine host to see his fellow courier.

The despatch which missed Cosmo de Ribolini by a few hours at Naples, missed Signor Pietri by four days in London. It was sent under cover to Martin Earle, with the request that he would deliver or forward it at once, as it was of the last importance. Cosmo had been markedly reticent about his business in Manchester, and so the goldsmith did not know where to send the packet: "But," reasoned he, "John can find Dick—I warrant me ruffling Dick will make himself known—and, he found, the rest is easy."

So the epistle—sealed with the Ribolini seal, and directed to the new head of the family with all his titles—was again put under cover, addressed to plain Signor Pietri, and, accompanied with a note to Hugh Desmond, begging him to aid in the search, was given to John Eastman with

orders to ride haste, post haste, to Lancashire. And so he did.

Now, Signor Pietri had been as good as his word, when he told Dick that he would not hurry, and that they would have a pleasant journey. The more the young noble thought about his mission the less he liked it. He was fain to put off the meeting with his grim kinsman as long as possible. He had a sort of vague hope something might occur to render his interposition unnecessary. De la Torre might become impatient, and act alone. He would give him every chance. So he went out of his way to see Oxford, and wasted two days at Warwick. Dick was delighted with such rambling, and you may be sure no remonstrance at the delay came from him. So John Eastman, riding straight and fast, would have all but overtaken them, even if that accident had not happened.

He went first to Desmond's house, as instructed, for the expected assistance. Hence Dame Martha's exclamation. Then he rode hither and thither, asking for Dick, who was not known, and next for Signor Pietri, and was told at last that there were two foreigners staying at the Golden Boar, one of whom was called Porras, not Pietri; but it might be the same—these folk had so many names. If it were not, still he would surely know where the other could be found. Then, as now, it was a maxim with the British mind, that all foreigners must be acquainted with each other. Away went John to the Golden Boar, and asked for Señor Porras. Hence the comment of mine host upon the importance of that visitor, when Tom Stevens made the same demand an hour later.

Very little passed in the town of any import which did not reach the ear of Master Willford, the witch-finder, and so long

before sundown he learned that two horsemen had arrived, each with messages for Hugh Desmond and Señor Porras — at least, both of them had called at Desmond's house.

We left Tom Stevens politely applying the pump to the first arrived courier, with his "Thou, also, it seems, hast business with Señor Porras?"

"Simply to find another person," John replied.

"His companion?" suggested Tom.

"I know not if he be his companion or no. He I seek is named Pietri, an Italian, fair and haughty in his way, whose guide is my fellow-'prentice."

"From London?" Tom asked, quickly.

"Aye, from London."

"Why, of course," said Tom, after a little consideration.

"Richard Earle?"

"Thou hast seen him. He is here,"

cried John, flushing with pleasure. "Lead me to him."

"That were not easy," Tom laughed. "He is many a good league away."

"But on his road hither?"

"Oh, dear, no," said unblushing Tom. "Let me get my dinner, and I will tell thee all about him, and thy Señor Porras too."

Gregory plucked his sleeve. "Anon, anon," he said, impatiently shaking himself free. "If thou canst talk on an empty stomach, that cannot I. The gentleman will wait till I have refreshed myself; wilt not, fair sir?"

But John Eastman had turned aside cursing his ill luck. Many a good league away, and not coming to Manchester! John had had quite enough of the saddle already.

"Take me to some place where we can talk apart," Tom whispered Denys as they passed into the street again, having ascer-

tained that dinner would be served in half an hour. "I would keep out of yon fellow's way until I have made up my plans about him."

"Leave him alone—what is he to thee?" was the smith's gruff reply. "Is this holding thy tongue as our master bade thee?"

"Thou shalt judge anon," said Tom.

They walked down to the river—it was a bright stream then, with banks lined with rushes, and spangled with the blue forget-me-not. Passing the Castle Field, where the Medlock and Tweed join their waters, they were soon out of the reach of interruption, and Tom narrated how Hugh Desmond had spoken of those foreigners, one of whom had turned out to be Señor Porras, and what had passed to detain them.

"And now," quoth Tom, "we must get that packet for Signor Pietri, who is mixed up with them for a surety in some way,

else they had not gone back to assist him."

"If they be our master's foes, how comes it that their messenger came to him for help?"

"That is what disturbs me. That is why I say I must get that packet. If it bode our master good, 'tis well he should have it quickly, and I may not say where he has gone. If it bode him ill, 'tis well all the same that its purport should be known to him. Canst read?"

"Not I."

"Nor I," and the pair laughed.

"Thou hast a head, Master Tom," said the smith, gazing with admiration into the stripling's excited face.

"And thou a mighty arm, Master Denys. But I would that one of us could read. Dost think *he* can?"

"The fellow yonder?" jerking his thumb over his shoulder.

Tom nodded an affirmative.

"God knows. He is from London," said the smith.

"Can all Londoners read?"

"Mayhap."

"I'll try him, anyway," mused Tom.

"But the packet is sealed—I saw it. He would not dare open it, unless——"

"I am not thinking of the packet," said Tom. "Methinks I see a way. Hark ye, Gregory: get thee a horse, and join me in two hours at the hotel with Hafid. Stand to whatever I say. I'll have that packet."

Tom dined, and did full justice to the cheer set before him. John Eastman had become anxious to learn more about Dick, and when they were alone came back to the subject.

"Well," said Tom, crossing his legs and looking mighty wise, "there is a good deal of mystery about this Signor Pietri into

which it were not good for us to pry too closely, Master—Master——”

“Eastman is my name.”

“I had forgotten for the moment. We riders, good Master Eastman, have to do what we are bid, and ask no questions.”

John did not quite like being taken for a rider, but he let it pass.

“I have a letter for thee.”

“Ha! give it, then.”

“Canst read?”

“Aye; where is the letter?”

Tom, expecting a contrary answer, had already put his hand in his pocket and half drawn forth that damaged epistle which was to be delivered to Señor Porras at the Golden Boar. It was too late to retract now, so he handed it.

“’Tis Dick’s own writing!” exclaimed the ‘prentice, “but in Italian. How comes that?”

Tom was relieved. "How should I know?" he said.

"Master rider," rejoined the other, severely. "I know not what is said herein, but the character is in English, and it is addressed to Señor Porras. Thou didst say just now that it was for me."

"Tut! it *is* for thee, though it bear not thy name. Listen. It is writ, as thou knowest, by thy friend, Richard Earle, who is travelling with this Signor Pietri. Dost admit that?"

"I do."

"Well, so far. This Signor Pietri has business with Señor Porras, and was journeying hither to join him."

"That may be so."

"It is so. Signor Pietri hurt his hand at—at—on the way, and I was sent on to call his friends to him where he was. I overtook him, and discharged my mission."

"How then hast the letter?"

"Patience," said Tom, with a deprecating smile. "Thou shalt be satisfied. What didst learn here respecting Señor Porras?"

"That he had ridden south, and would return in a week, or less."

"To wait for Signor Pietri?"

"I suppose so."

"Then having already met him, he will not return."

"How know you that?"

"Because he told me," replied Tom, with well-feigned impatience. "I left him going where his friend was, and he said, 'Hie thee on to Manchester all the same, and if there be any packet at my lodgings for me or Signor Pietri, bring it back.' Said I, 'Give me some warrant, for they will not credit a simple lad such as I am.' 'There is no time to write,' said he, 'but take this ring—stay, better still, take this letter thou hast brought me; it will explain why I turn back, and be thy warrant. But be

careful. Bring on the packet *thyself*, for '—well, I may not tell thee what else he said. I told you just now there are mysteries about this Signor," said the accomplished young liar, lowering his voice into a whisper.

"It might be another Popish plot," mused the other.

"It might, indeed; in good sooth, *it might!*"

"In which an honest man would risk his head before he knew where he was."

"That's the danger," Tom rejoined, decisively.

"And Dick is with them. Poor, dear, trusting Dick! By heaven!" cried John Eastman, bringing his fist down upon the table with a crash, "*I will* go and warn Dick!"

Now this was by no means what Tom was leading up to. He wanted to frighten Dick's friend out of the packet, and was

considerably taken aback by this outburst of affection ; but as his auditor got up and began to pace the room in his excitement, he had time to think. He thrust his hands into his pockets, stretched out his legs, and observed, in a careless tone—

“ Oh, *he* is safe.”

“ Safe! How can he be safe in the company of those whom thou hast admitted may be traitors ?”

“ Who said he was in their company ?”

“ Why, thou thyself.”

“ Pshaw! Is this Dick of thine a fool ?”

“ I will break the pate of any that say so,” cried John, striding up to him.

“ Then break not mine,” laughed Tom. “ I hold him to be a wise man for quitting them as he did.”

“ He has quitted them?” cried the other, aghast.

“ Good Master Eastman,” said our romancer, “ did I not tell thee that Signor

Pietri had sent me for his friends, and that those friends had gone to him?"

"Thou didst, but——"

"Well, they had then no need of thy Dick, or he of them. Ah! it is a fine thing to be independent," Tom sighed. "I marvel that so spirited a blade put up with such service as long as he did."

"Gone back to London!" mused John Eastman.

"Not to play the lacquey again, I'll warrant," said Tom.

"He never played the lacquey," cried the other, indignantly.

"As you will. All I can say is, that when I saw them together, this fine signor did not do a thing for himself; it was, 'bring me this,' and 'do that.'"

All of which was, for once, the truth. The poor gentleman could not move hand or foot; but it gave honest John the idea that his friend was being put upon,

and removed the last scruple from his mind.

“To the devil with him and his packet!” he shouted, flinging it on the table. “*I’ll be no lacquey!*”

Tom’s eyes devoured the letter now within reach of his hand, but he dared not show his eagerness.

“A poor lad like me has no choice,” he said, sadly. “I must fetch and carry like a dog, and for less than a dog’s fee. Dogs get a kind word and a pat of the hand sometimes. I don’t. Well, I’ll carry it. Get thee back to thy home, good Master Eastman, and let this be a warning to thee; carry no more letters for foreigners who wander about the country and may not tell their business, an you value your neck.”

With which sage advice, Tom pocketed the letter, and strolled out into the street.

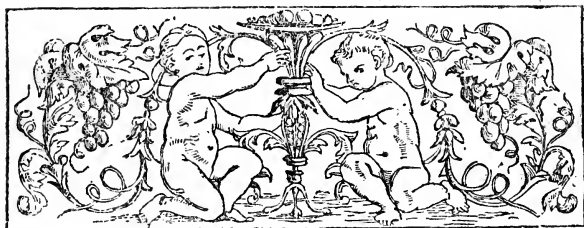
In due time Gregory Denys appeared, mounted, and leading Hafid.

“Well,” whispered the smith, as Tom sprang into his saddle, “what of the letter?”

“I’ve got it.”

“By fair means?”

“I lied for it. The Lord help me! If I am to be damned for lying for my master, I am a lost soul this day! *But I’ve got the packet!*”



CHAPTER X.

“FORGIVE HIM THIS TIME!”



THOUGH DESMOND rose soon after Tom Stevens' departure, and walked into Stafford to buy horses (hired beasts might be traced) for the flitting. As he rode back on one of his purchases, leading the other, he was surprised to see several persons collected round his door. There was a woman on a donkey, and four men standing by a sort of litter made of a gate and green boughs. His heart, full of anxiety and suspicion, gave a bound as he dashed forward into

their midst, and it was some time before he could listen patiently to Dick Earle's explanation.

We know all that had happened up to the arrival of the woman at the road-side hovel, so there is no need to repeat it. In five minutes Dick had got more out of the hoveller's wife than he would have obtained in a life-time from that hermit.

Why, of course there was a house near! —the house of Master Desmond, a good gentleman and a kind; an excellent leech to boot. Had he not given her some bitter stuff which had taken the "shakes" out of her last Martinmas? Why did not her good man send them to Master Desmond?

Her good man admitted that he *had* thought of Master Desmond. This was when that stray spark of intelligence flickered, as already narrated; but with this thought came the idea that perchance

the gentleman might die, and so save trouble. He did not say "and so save trouble," but that was what he meant.

So they got help, made a litter, and here they were.

"Thou wilt surely not deny help and hospitality to one who spoke thee so fairly," said Dick when, his story ended, Hugh Desmond made no reply, but stood gazing moodily upon the ground.

Common humanity bade him receive the sufferer, and, on the other hand, the charity which begins at home urged that nothing should be allowed to derange his plans for flight. He thought only of his flight just then. No suspicion that the man in the litter could be in any way connected with his enemies occurred to him. When they had met at Stafford he was presented as a gentleman going on business to the North, and Dick said nothing now about that message to Manchester; not because he had

anything to conceal, but simply for the reason that he saw no necessity to mention it.

Under any other circumstances, Hugh Desmond's house, and all the healing skill he possessed, would have been cordially at the sufferer's service. He was a friend of Bosco, and of Martin Earle. He had, as Dick pleaded, spoken him (Desmond) "fairly." Above all, his anxious, pain-wrung face pleaded for him.

"There is time yet," mused Hugh, "to see to his hurts and bestow him comfortably. Better here than in yon hovel. Yes, he would take him in."

He strode up to the door and knocked.

"'Tis no use," said Dick; "we have been knocking for half-an-hour in vain. Art alone here, Master Desmond?"

In a moment he had his answer. There is knocking and knocking. At the master's first tap the bolts were drawn and the pas-

sage free. He laid his finger on his lip, and made a sign to Sweetheart, who instantly retired.

Then Cosmo de Ribolini—known to all present, but one, as plain Signor Pietri, and unknown by that one to have any connection with his hostess—was carried carefully to the room of the sister who had “disgraced” her family, was placed upon her own bed, and the man whom he had crossed the seas to kill without pity or defence tended his hurts with a gentle hand.

A collar-bone and three ribs were broken, and there was what an engraver might call “a beautifully sharp impression” of a demi-pique saddle on his left side. What internal injury there might be Hugh Desmond could not tell. He hoped for the best as the patient breathed freely, and there was no spitting of blood; but he was badly bruised and shaken in that *mauvais cinq*

minutes he had passed between the hard ground and a struggling horse, as may well be imagined. It was like heaven to the poor fellow to have his clothes cut off, and to be stretched on that cool, soft couch. Some unguent which Desmond applied to his side soon took the sting out. Hitherto he had shrank from the lightest touch—now he submitted himself like a weary child to those strong but gentle hands.

Sweetheart remained in the adjoining apartment, full of wonder. It was part of her love-creed that Hugh Desmond could do no wrong; but women are quick to detect inconsistencies, and could not help contrasting his teaching with his practice. Why, after that episode of the beggar, should he let his sympathy get the better of his prudence, and admit a stranger who spoke Italian into their very house? How did she know he spoke Italian? Well, the wainscoting which divided the two rooms had a crack

in it, and she was a daughter of Eve. She peeped, and was rewarded by a full view of her husband, and of part of a shoulder and some hair belonging to the man on the bed. Then she tried a different sense, and clapped one of her pretty ears to the fissure.

“ I have seen our hostess,” Dick observed as he resumed his seat by Signor Pietri’s side, after the mid-day meal.

“ He is married, then ? Aye, I remember now.”

“ And has two sweet children, a boy who has just recovered from the fever, and a girl the very image of her mother. Most Illustrious, I would thou couldst see the lady.”

“ *E’ bella ?*”

“ If thou wert to ask me that in English—saying ‘is she beautiful?’ I would say aye. Our word ‘beautiful’ fits her. Her face, her form, her voice, her smile, her movements, are full of beauty ; and there

is a world of it in her love for Desmond. She eyes him like a dog."

"Fie! Oh, for shame! to liken such a lady to a dog," said the gallant, indignantly.

"I said she eyed him like a dog, and if thou canst find me aught more full of tenderness and trust than the gaze of a faithful hound, I will take thy simile."

"Say, then, like a loving woman."

"She *is* a loving woman. That were no simile."

"Have thy way," laughed the other (he could laugh now). "And the child is like her?"

"As bud and flower."

"Poetical! Must I warn our good host to guard well his flower, master poet?"

"An thou wouldst insult him—and me—thou canst," said Dick.

"Nay, I did but jest. Right glad am I that he is so happy. He deserves to be so,

Dick ; 'tis a noble soul. Tell me more of the lady. Is she dark or fair ?"

"Dark, with lustrous violet eyes."

"That is not an English type."

"It is somewhat rare here, but in Ireland, they say, it is common."

"She is Irish, then ?" Cosmo asked this with surprise.

Irish and *Savage* were synonymous terms in those *good old days*, and so continued to be in times setting up to be wiser, with results which are not yet removed.

"No," Dick replied, "she is a foreigner."

"Indeed ! Of what country ?"

"I know not. She speaks our tongue fluently, but with just a little accent."

"Think you that my being here discom-modes her ?"

Dick looked round the room, which afforded several distinct proofs of female occupancy. His meaning was quickly caught.

"I pray thee hie to Master Desmond. and beg him to have me moved. Any chamber will do for me. I am much better now. I think I could walk," said Cosmo. But his first effort to show his strength was a dismal failure, and he sank back exhausted with the effort. Dick, frightened at the pallor which came over his face, did hie to Master Desmond, who promptly appeared, and having chided his patient for disobeying orders to remain perfectly still, was pressed by him to infringe them himself by acceding to his request for removal.

"It must not be," he replied decisively. "Thou art not intruding; thou must not stir; but I will be frank with thee. Hadst thou not been brought here, I and mine would have left this house to-day. We *must* leave at the latest to-morrow. This is why (to Dick) I hesitated, and doubtless thou didst think me churlish, at the gate.

We must leave thee, Signor. Trust me, 'tis a matter of life and death; but my house, and all it contains are at thy service, and I will send a good and trusty leech to tend thee. Rest, methinks is the only medicine thou needest. Tell me thou dost not hold me wanting in hospitality. Indeed, indeed, I must go."

He was so earnest, that he heard not the patter of little feet upon the floor, or felt that a little warm hand was slipped in his. Children are curious animals; and Miss Mary had been burning for hours for a peep at the "poor gentleman." She had it now. She stood, finger on lip, by the bedside, with that expression half of fear, half of pity, which the presence of suffering will bring into the face of a child. She saw the "poor gentleman" now, and he saw her before her father had well ended his appeal.

"Thy child?" cried Cosmo, with a start;

and the words on his tongue for reply to that appeal clean left him.

"Mary, dear, how camest thou here? Go to thy—go—" Desmond began.

"Oh, I pray thee, let her stay," interrupted Cosmo, eagerly, and trying to stretch a hand towards her. "Thy child! How strange. Wilt kiss me, little one?"

She looked up into her father's face, saw no refusal there, and kissed the flushed cheeks on the pillow.

"Don't cry," she said, "you will be better soon; papa said so."

Ah, the sweet faith of childhood! *Papa said so*, and therefore it must be true. By this time Dick had retired to let them have their talk out alone.

"Has she hurt thee?" said Desmond, noticing that the eyes, still fixed upon his child, were full of tears.

"Hurt me! oh, no! These" (brushing

away the drops upon his cheek)—“are not for pain—not for the pain that thou canst cure. No, little one, you hurt me not. Tell her, I pray thee, that she hurt me not, but the touch of her innocent lips went to my heart. Years ago there was one so like her, that—that I loved dearly, Master Desmond, and she is lost to me.” He had got out a hand now, and placed it lovingly on little Mary’s head.

“Thy sister?” Desmond asked, with an interest which he could not account for or restrain.

“My only sister; the only one of my kin, except my poor mother, who understood and loved me. I was a wayward youth, rash and thoughtless; and my father—a stern man—went not the right way with me. She, my little sister, was the angel in the house, the peace-maker, the soother of my rebellious thoughts, my counsellor, my *friend*.”

“And she is dead?”

“Worse than dead,” Cosmo replied, bitterly, “*disgraced*.”

“Not so,” said a calm voice; “not disgraced, Cosmo de Ribolini, for THIS IS MY HUSBAND.”

If you have not forgotten the crack in the wainscot, you know who was the speaker. She had missed little Mary, and to her dismay found that the child had followed her to the sick-room, but why did he keep her there? She looked, and saw. She saw the *soi disant* Signor Pietri raise his face to be kissed, and knew him for her brother. Oh, how her heart yearned to him as he spoke of her so lovingly! What a struggle she had to refrain from rushing into the room and flinging herself on her knees by his side. Her own brother! her darling, handsome Cosmo! crushed, perhaps maimed for life! perhaps dying! Her brother kissing her child for

love of her, and recalling so tenderly those old days when she had stood between him and their grim father's wrath. But that one word, "*disgraced*," dried up her tears and stopped the passionate beating of her heart. Disgraced! should *any* lips speak that word of her in the presence of the husband she idolized? Her southern blood rebelled against the insult—to *him*. Pride banished fear. As an empress advancing to claim her crown on the day of coronation, she came before them. She wound a white arm around Hugh Desmond's neck, and calmly uttered these memorable words: "NOT DISGRACED, COSMO DE RIBOLINI, FOR THIS IS MY HUSBAND!"

"Cosmo de Ribolini!" cried Desmond, in a voice of anguish; "then we are lost!"

"I see," said his wife, calmly as ever. "Thou bearest the message those men expected. Our death-warrant, Cosmo."

He had fallen back upon his pillows pale

as ashes. He moved his lips, but no sound came.

“And thou art come here like a spy, under the pretence——”

“Hush!” whispered Hugh. “Be just; ’tis no pretence.”

Cosmo gave him a look of gratitude. Could this woman, stern as a Pythoness, under whose piercing gaze he quailed, be his gentle sister, or the timid, lovable creature described by Richard Earle?

“I am glad of that,” she said, “I know our race is cruel; I am glad we have escaped that meaner vileness. Well, you have found us. Is the man below thy comrade? Is he thy hired bravo? our executioner? Speak, why do you not reply?”

The child, who understood not one word that was said, and, child-like, thought that she must have done something wrong, clung to her mother, and hid her little face in her robe. Then it began to dawn upon

her that the sick gentleman must have been naughty. She edged her way shyly to the bed, and taking the hand which lay spent and trembling on the coverlet, looking up into her mother's face, said pleadingly—

“Forgive him this time! Oh, do!”

He caught her to his bosom with a low, passionate sob, and murmured—

“Little Maria! little Maria!”

In an instant his sister was on her knees by his side, the now frightened child between them.

“Oh, forgive me!” she cried. “It cannot, *cannot* be! Oh, my brother! tell me there is no bond between you and those murderers? Tell me you will protect my husband?”

“As God is my Judge, Maria,” he replied, “I did not know that Master Desmond was thy husband; I did know that ye lived here. But I am awaited in Man-

chester, and I am the bearer of what was intended to be the death-warrant of the man with whom thou didst fly from thy home, and of thy boy!"

She gave a piercing cry, and started up.

You who are mothers and read this, know whither her heart flew—whither her faltering steps were about to take her. Her impulse was to rush to the cot where she had left little Hugh, to clasp him in her arms, to make her bosom his shield, to die for him or with him. Why, even now, the "man below," about whom Cosmo had not replied, might have done his deadly errand! But as she rose her brother caught her robe, and whispered—

"I said 'intended.'"

"Not by thee?"

"God help me! I cannot do it."

The beautiful, terror-stricken face sank

on his hand, which she covered with kisses and tears.

Little Mary, who had been clinging to her mother, now turned again towards the "poor gentleman," put aside the dank locks which had fallen over his forehead with her chubby fingers, and nodding wisely at her father, said—

"He's good now."

All this time Hugh Desmond had stood by with folded arms, and a tempest in his mind which crushed or scattered thought. With amazement he saw the change that came over his gentle, timid Maria. With horror he listened to Cosmo's avowal of his mission, and caught no more than his wife had done the peculiar intonation which marked the word "intended."

Had the young Italian come there and said, "Master Desmond, my father has sent me to kill thee, but I will not do his cruel will; nay, more, I will protect you and

yours against all who may seek to carry it out"—he would have heard him with the calm dignity born of honest pride and conscious innocence.

What had he done to be forgiven? Stolen a noble maiden—but from what? From the arms of a cold, worn-out voluptuary; from a life without a ray of love in it; from a compact whose main object was to join some patches of insensate earth together, though a tender heart were broken in the act! And for this he was doomed to death! He, a free-born Englishman, was to be assassinated upon his own native soil, because he had displeased the Ribolini! Small cause was there—viewing the position coolly, as we do now—for gratitude to the chief assassin because he was graciously pleased to sheathe his dagger.

But the end did not come in this wise; nor was it the result of any prayer for

mercy, or appeal to brotherly affection. No ; Desmond had not stooped an inch, until four baby words had laid the whole fabric of hatred and revenge in ruins. Four baby words—of which the object did not know the meaning, but accompanied by a mute appeal, of which the purport could not be mistaken—turned the scale.

"Forgive him this time !"

With other ways, but the same sweet, sad, pleading look, she whom he had called the angel of the house had stood between him and his angry parent in the days of his unloved youth. And this was her child, pleading for him—to her ! This was the new peace-maker ; and when her solemn decision, "He's good now," was lisped, there was no resisting. Pride, dignity, hard thoughts, fierce resolves, went by the board. Hugh Desmond broke down utterly, fell upon Sweetheart's neck, and sobbed like a child.

“Master Desmond,” said Cosmo, “before I ask you to take my hand, and with it the pledge that no harm shall befall thee or thine through me, let me bare my heart, and show thee that I am sincere. Perchance thou knowest the traditions of our great houses?”

Hugh assented.

“Good! Brought up as we are, it is a hard thing to resist obedience to them; but I did resist. I fought against my father’s command; I fought against my own revengeful feelings, which prompted me to obey it. I knew not that my sister had mated with a good man; I knew not that she was happy. Sometimes I thought that *any* fate was better for her than that we had prepared; and again family pride—aye, and love for her—embittered my soul against the man who had saved her from it. He had robbed me of her sweet company, as I thought, for ever. Will you

believe me, good Master Desmond, when I tell thee that all this time I, too, had resolved to do as this dear one did, and marry out of the narrow circle within which the laws of my race would confine my choice?

"Can I explain such inconsistency? Not I. But it will show how the first glimpse of thy happiness destroyed the last drop of poison in my mind. Had I but known thee as my sister's husband, it would have passed away long ago. Will you take my hand now, Hugh Desmond?"

Need I tell what followed?

When Dick Earle returned, the spectacle presented fairly took his breath away. Cosmo had asked to see little Hugh, and the two children were there, one on each side, with his two arms round them; Sweetheart, on a low stool at his side, had her face on the pillow touching his; and Hugh Desmond, with all the gloom out of

him, sat looking on as though it were all right. What could this mean? Well, there was no need to tell him *all* it meant. The Viscount Cosmo de Ribolini was Sweetheart's brother.

"Oh, indeed!" was all Dick could say; and having said it, the honest fellow made himself as scarce as the situation demanded.

So passed the happiest hours that three out of that five had spent for many a year. Night came on, and the children dropped off to sleep where they lay; but no one thought of moving. Sweetheart was the first to break the spell.

What were they to do? Should they all fly together? she whispered to her husband.

Hugh looked at Cosmo, and shook his head. There was cause for no hurry now, he thought. Vincenti Della Torre would keep to his plan, and wait. As soon as

Cosmo was sufficiently recovered, he could join his vengeful kinsman, and detain him, on one pretext and another, until they (the Desmonds) were well out of danger.

“He” (meaning Vincenti) “cannot act alone,” he told her. “When he starts for Manchester, it will be quite time enough for us to leave this place.”

This was arranged just about the same time of night that Tom Stevens assured himself, with a chuckle of satisfaction, he had done his master good service by sending those two travellers back upon their road.

It was arranged to the satisfaction of all concerned. It was only when he awoke the next morning, with a clearer head, that Cosmo remembered what Dick Earle had done; and even then he did not know exactly what message had been sent. He only remembered that, whilst half

stunned and wholly dazed by his crushing, Dick had asked where his friend lived in Manchester, and what was his name.



CHAPTER XI.

HOW THE SNARE WAS SET.

“**F**OOLED! I told thee it would be so,” sneered the man called Marco, as his companion knocked in vain at the door of the hovel, which, thanks to Master Tom’s precise instructions, they had found without difficulty. “Fooled! Did I not warn thee? By the Holy Virgin and all the saints, I will be even yet with that young villain! Oh, thou mayest knock till night. Who could live in such a place? We have had our ride for nought. A whole day lost!

Body of Bacchus! If I only had him here! A knave, a lying knave!" And so *da capo*.

Marco was angry. He was angry to begin with, and he got more so as he went on. This was a mistake. The well-worn formula of mingled triumph and reproach, "*I told you so*," is effective in proportion to the calmness of its application. Storm it out with an angry stamp, and it isn't of much use. Go on nagging with it as Marco did, and its sting soon wears away. But if you desire to render an ordinary lord of the creation, who finds that you were right after all, frantic, or to send the average lady thereof, who finds that she was wrong, into a first-class rampage—be moderate. No loudness, no repetition. Assume a pensive expression of countenance, slightly raise your eyebrows, and with a slight wave of the hand, thumb outwards, turn from the fatal spot.

Vincenti Della Torre never got angry—or, at any rate, never showed anger. He gave Marco a look from under his evil brows, and half muttered, “Animal!” but he left off knocking, and looked around him.

The hovel did not stand on the road. The patch of turf in front of it was cut up by horse’s hoofs, and there were chips of wood and green twigs freshly cut, and straw strewn about around the door. As this was only fastened by a rude bolt, he pushed it open, and found that the embers of the fire were cold; but as he looked more closely, something caught his eye amongst the straw in a corner—a horseman’s glove, and of Italian make! He came out quite satisfied. He had not been fooled.

“Well, let us ride back,” said Marco.
“Why waste more time?”

“We have wasted none,” replied his

kinsman. "They have been here. See!" and he held up the glove.

"But have left, so what does it matter?" the other grumbled.

He did not like to be robbed of his "*I told you so.*"

"They have not gone far. Dismount, good cousin, and be patient. I know what has passed, as though I had seen it with mine eyes."

"Indeed!" scoffed Marco. "Hast second sight?"

"It needs not that," replied Vincenti, quietly, "to read marks so plain. These footprints show that they have come here; this glove that they stayed here; yon twigs were cut when a litter was made to carry our wounded kinsman to a neighbouring house. In a short time some one will return to tell us the rest. Be patient!"

"A litter! How canst guess they made

a litter ? They might have been chopping firewood."

"One does not chop firewood from green boughs, to begin with. They made the litter yonder, and then dragged it to the door. Here are the marks ! The straw was brought out to make a bed upon it. Look down towards the road, and you will see the tracks of the four persons who carried it."

"Thou art a wonderful man !" sighed Marco, now thoroughly subdued.

"Not so. Only a patient one. All comes with patience."

"As the tracks are so clear, why not follow them ?"

"I thought of that," mused Vincenti ; "but—as thou art mounted, ride on a little, and see how far they *are* clear, before we decide."

They were plain enough on the turf, which had soaked the rain of the previous

night ; but this had quite washed them out of the road. And so Marco reported upon his return. There was nothing to show which way the litter had gone—up or down.

“Better wait,” said Della Torre.

And so they waited.

The hoveller, his wife, and the passer-by whom Dick Earle had pressed into the service, left Desmond's house with such a meal under their belts as had not warmed them for many a long day, and more broad pieces than they had earned in any year of their hard lives. The temptation to spend part of their wealth was strong, and so was the ale they had drunk. The men—as is not unusual under such circumstances—became sworn friends ; and as the stranger was bound for Stafford, the hoveller, who had forgotten all about his “shakes,” would not hear of his going alone ; and the

woman—partly with an eye to business connected with a certain pair of shoes and a kerchief for which her soul lusted, and partly to see that her lord did not spend too much upon himself—insisted upon joining the party.

They spent the night in town, and I regret to say that the same influence which had brought about that sudden friendship dissolved it.

The men got very drunk, and parted with mutual vows of vengeance. It was nigh noon on the following day before the hoveller had slept off the worst effects of his unwonted potations; and then they jogged back, to the great delight of the donkey, who had somehow been neglected during these festivities.

“More on ’em!” cried the hoveller, as they came in sight of their dwelling. “Lord, if there’s another accident, we’re made for life!”

But his amiable hopes were doomed to be disappointed. There was not another accident—only two gentlemen who wanted to know what had become of the victim to the original one. Two gentlemen, sent by the messenger who had passed, bound for Manchester, one of whom was struck dumb with surprise when told whither the object of his search had been carried. For once in his life Vincenti Della Torre was taken aback, and showed it.

“Is he dead?” cried Marco, in Italian.

“No,” whispered the other in the same language, “and I shrewdly suspect not even hurt.”

The speaker's thoughts ran with wile and treachery, just as naturally as his veins ran with blood. His creed was to disbelieve everything that appeared to be straightforward, and to seek hidden motives for the simplest act. In a moment it flashed upon him that he was being tricked. He

asked if the foreign gentleman was aware to whose house he was being conveyed, and was told he did. More, that the guide knew Master Desmond well, and that they had all three met at Stafford. "The dotard has relented," muttered Vincenti, with a bitter curse. "Fool that I was to tell him so much! But how has he discovered the man of whom I wrote to be Desmond? Patience, patience! let me think." His thoughts ran thus: If the foreigner who had been taken to Desmond's house were Cosmo de Ribolini (and there could be little doubt of that), and he were really disabled, he would never have placed himself in the power of a man who had such reason to fear him, if he had been sent to execute the vengeance of his house. Was, then, the accident a myth, and his pretended hurt a pretext for obtaining an opportunity to carry out that vengeance single-handed? This might be. The cousin

knew that his kinsman loved him not, and might be glad to rob him of his share in the long-cherished scheme of revenge. And yet how could he count against non-recognition by his sister before he could act? No; this would indicate a recklessness out of character with the other details of his plot. Was it possible that he did not know Desmond as his enemy, and was really hurt? Marco was right, after all, about the letter carried by Tom Stevens. They should have obtained that at all hazards. Well, Cosmo had sent for him, at any rate, which proved he had no intention of acting alone. It also seemed to disprove the idea that the vendetta had been abandoned.

Repugnant as it was to the thinker's nature to believe the facts presented to be true and straightforward, his reflections dislodged him from the false position his own cunning had imagined. There was

one thing, however, for which he could not account—that meeting at Stafford. He had carefully cross-examined the hoveller's wife on this point. She, surprised at Master Desmond's apparent unwillingness to receive the sufferer, had noted well Dick Earle's half-reproachful appeal, and repeated it *verbatim*, "THOU WILT SURELY NOT DENY HELP AND HOSPITALITY TO ONE WHO SPOKE THEE SO FAIRLY." Not a word had passed between them on that occasion. The guide must have referred to something which had been said at Stafford, and if there were any plot the guide was in it. Musing upon this, the thinker was carried back over the old ground, to shift as before, and come round again to what he felt was the key of the situation—the fair words spoken at Stafford. Had they met there by design? Had they made friends? If so, why was Desmond unwilling to grant help and hospitality to the brother of his wife?

If not, what could have been the cause of that fair speaking ?

So pondered Vincenti Della Torre, puzzling his brains with their own craft. It may be good policy to set a thief to catch a thief, but put a trickster to unravel something that has not got a trick in it, and he makes a woful tangle.

Our trickster came to only one fixed conclusion, and that was, to communicate with Cosmo, and find in the answer a solution of the doubts which perplexed him. He did not tell Marco of those doubts, but only consulted with him as to how they were to get at their kinsman.

“ If I only had my beggar’s dress here !” sighed that worthy.

“ ’Twould not avail us. It never did beyond the outer gate. We must reach his chamber,” said Vincenti.

“ Or wait till he is well, and departs.”

“ Thou art improving, cousin mine. I

have not preached patience to thee in vain. That we can do if all other plans fail ; but methinks I see a speedier way." Then he turned back to the hovel, and called out the woman.

"It would seem that our friend is in good hands," he said, "and that we can do nothing for him, but would fain let him know we came to his assistance, as he asked us, and this without troubling good Master Desmond, who has been disturbed enough. Thou hast been rewarded for thy pains?"

"Aye, and richly too," she replied, gratefully. "'Tis a kind gentleman, and a liberal."

"And thou wouldst gladly know if he be recovering from his hurts?"

She assented.

"What more natural that thou shouldst show thy gratitude by going again to ask how he fares?"

"To bear thy message?"

“Well, not precisely,” he said, opening his purse and producing a gold piece. “Interested as thou art in his welfare, thou mightest beg to see him. He could scarce refuse so small a favour? One does not thank with money alone. But verily, thou couldst bear my message at the same time, though it be not the cause of thine errand.”

“Tut! tut!” she exclaimed; “speak out, good sir. I am to deliver thy message in secret—is that so?”

He looked her straight in the face for a moment, and then did as she bade him.

“Slip a paper I will give thee into his hand, and this” (giving her the gold)—“is thy fee. Bring back his reply, and it shall be doubled.”

“But I speak not his tongue, or he mine,” said the woman.

“No matter; the reply will be ‘yes’ or ‘no.’”

Then on a leaf from his tablet he wrote as follows :—

“Art thou my kinsman? Art really hurt? Hast thou orders from Mantua? I am near thee with Marco, and will be in the wood behind the hovel thou hast left, every day at dusk till I see thee. Wilt meet me there as soon as thou art well enough? Is thy guide to be trusted? Answer by the one word ‘yes’ or ‘no’ in English.

“VINCENTI.”

He rolled the paper into a ball, and rehearsed the business of giving it with his messenger. She was an apt pupil. Then he, too, fell to wondering how so quick a woman could endure the life she led with that sodden, sulky brute of a husband. Let him wonder. Perhaps it suited her; perhaps she had no choice; perhaps, with three gold pieces of her own, she may better herself. Who cares?

We know that in all classes, except, maybe, the very highest, the women are more intelligent as a rule than the men. It may have been so, also, in the good old days.

By this time Cosmo de Ribolini had learned from Dick all about the message sent to Manchester; but as neither of them knew that Desmond's servant was its bearer, that Vincenti Porras and his companion were on the road, or that Tom Stevens had orders to provide an accident for delaying them, the information did not much derange the plan of the person most interested. True, as matters stood, his kinsman would not await him in Manchester. He would probably seek him at the hovel, and he was devising some scheme for detaining him there without needlessly alarming his hosts, when the arrival of the woman put quite a different complexion on the affair.

Poor loving Sweetheart, overflowing with gratitude to those who had been of service to her brother, at once acceded to her request to see and, as she said, thank him for his bounty—the good, grateful creature !

So the little ball of paper was slipped into Cosmo's hand, and he read the first words and the signature. His impulse was to send for Desmond, and have the messenger detained ; but luckily (as it turned out) he checked himself. He made some excuse for getting Dick, who had come as interpreter, out of the room for a few minutes, and then he carefully perused the missive, and gave the woman his reply.

Half-way on her return, she met her employer.

“Well,” he asked, somewhat more eagerly than was his wont, “hast seen him ?”

“Aye, master.”

“Alone?”

“The guide was with him when I went up; but he sent him away.”

“And then you gave him the paper?”

“No, I had already done so.”

“What said he? His reply, quick?”

“It was one word—‘*Yes.*’”

“Art sure—quite sure?”

“Certain. He spoke quite plainly—‘yes.’ I asked, to make certain, ‘Yes?’ and he said it again.”

“Good! Thou hast done well. Here are thy two gold pieces. Be silent, and they will not be the last thou mayest earn.”

Good! The news was excellent—much better than he had hoped for. The man at Desmond’s was truly Cosmo de Ribolini; he was hurt, he had news from Mantua, and would meet him (Vincenti) as he had arranged. All was well, or the guide would not have been sent away as he had

been. That little detail was all-convincing. *It showed that Cosmo did not trust those around him!* All was well.

Having thought it out in this wise, Vincenti sought further information from his messenger, and ascertained that, to the best of her belief, the guide had not seen Cosmo read the paper. After the first glance at it he (Cosmo) had crumpled it up again in his hand. Then he turned his back, and—as she supposed—read it. Yes, he was up, sitting in a chair. The lady had told her he was much better, and would be out in a day or two. Did they receive her kindly? Oh, yes, particularly the lady. And when she left, were they equally kind?

“Why not?” she asked, by way of reply.
“I had done them no harm, had I?”

Signor Vincenti did not feel bound to answer this question. He had heard enough.


He explained the position—according to his view of it—to Marco.

“We will go back,” he said, “to the place where we rested two nights ago. We shall be quieter and less observed there than at Stafford. Let me see. This is Friday. On Sunday, perchance, he will be able to sit his horse. On Sunday, then, I will return. What did I say to thee about patience! We have been anything but ‘fooled,’ my good Marco!”



CHAPTER XII.

HUGH DESMOND'S SHIELD.

OSMO DE RIBOLINI was, of course, unaware of the effect which his sending Dick out of the room had produced; nor did it occur to him that his kinsman, Vincenti Della Torre, could even suspect the possibility of a reconciliation between himself and Desmond.

You must remember that Desmond's name was not mentioned in that letter which his father had shown him in Mantua. The writer had only stated that he was on

the tracks of "the man." So far as Cosmo knew, the clue had not yet been obtained. He had been told nothing about the beggar and the conversation overheard by Sweetheart.

Partly because Desmond did not wish to further excite his patient, already deeply moved ; partly because he saw no immediate necessity to tell him *all* the truth ; and a good deal because they had been so happy together that night, that he had not the heart to tell it—he kept silence. He also was himself only half informed. Years of miserable anxiety and suspicion had made him taciturn, had shut him up in his own thoughts and his own plans. He asked no questions.

As for Sweetheart, she was so confident in her brother's ability to protect her and hers, that if there had been a score of Vincentis in the field, she would not have feared them.

The key to this unfortunate imbroglio was the message sent by Tom Stevens. If Cosmo had only mentioned that, all would have come out ; but Cosmo kept his own counsel. Not for an instant did he repent what he had done. He felt that he had done right, and was quiet, happy, and confident.

He respected, almost loved his sister's husband. Not a hair of his, or his child's head should be hurt ; but — here the Ribolini pride came in—they should be protected by *him*, Cosmo. That was *his* duty, *his* privilege—his alone, not to be shared by any one. Desmond was a tender spouse, a loving father, a brave and good man. His reward was that he might wed with a Ribolini and live ; but meddle in the Ribolini's affairs ?—never ! The stake to be played for was his life and that of his little son ; but he could not be permitted to take any part in the game. This was

to be played out in the family and by the family.

So Cosmo kept silent about the message to Manchester ; kept silent about the return of Vincenti and Marco ; kept silent about his appointment to meet them in the wood ; kept silent about every topic connected with the past ; and, to make up for such reticence, spoke so gaily of the future, that his hearers began to treat their danger as though it had existed only in some nightmare, from which they had happily awakened.

“When, thinkest thou, that I shall be able to resume my journey?” he asked Hugh Desmond, the morning after the delivery of Vincenti’s message.

“In about a week.”

“Oh ! less than that. See, how well I can walk now.”

“Thou hast no internal hurt, as I at first

feared. 'Tis a simple case of bruising, which at thy age passes off quickly. Thou wilt know thyself when thy bones are fit for the saddle."

"Would it not be well for me to essay for a short distance a day or two before I make my final start, and so get some of the stiffness out of my limbs, and test my strength?"

"It would, indeed."

"Then I will try to-morrow," said Cosmo.

"I have need myself to ride abroad to-morrow," Desmond replied. "Thou canst bear me company part of the way."

"Nay, nay, brother mine," laughed the other, "not so. I am just a little proud of my horsemanship, and, with thy good leave, will be the sole witness of mine own awkwardness. I shall but take a short turn in the pleasant English lanes around thy dwelling. I shall go alone."

Thus did he provide for keeping his appointment with Della Torre.

Now Tom Stevens had left at daybreak on the previous Thursday, and would be at the old mill with Gregory by some time on Sunday. Desmond's original plan was to meet them there with Sweetheart and the children, to send Tom on in charge of the latter towards London, and double back with the young smith to meet, and, if possible, dispose of the enemy. The enemy, thanks to Cosmo, had been already disposed of. Cosmo had confirmed what he had whispered to Sweetheart on the evening of their reconciliation. Vincenti and Marco were at his orders. They could not act without him. "Thou art quite safe," he said; "leave all to me." This was not as satisfactory as it might be, but Desmond was proud too, and did not press the subject. Nevertheless, he determined not to leave it all to Cosmo. His kinsman might

not obey him. The old scheme might have to be followed, after all.

So early on the Sunday morning he started on his mission, and towards the cool of the evening Cosmo de Ribolini went on his, making the same excuse to Dick, who had volunteered his company, that he had already given to Desmond. Sweetheart accompanied him to the gate. He stooped and kissed her; and although she was only his sister, the laws of the *haute école* had to be observed. He bared his head, spurred his steed, and departed with a caracole, which looked mighty pretty, but made his sore bones ache again. Accustomed to the shorter twilight of the south, he had miscalculated his time. The sun was still high when he reached the wood in rear of the hovel. He dismounted, tied up his horse to a tree, and was by no means sorry to stretch himself upon the soft turf near its shade. He

had not waited long before the sound of jingling bits and the crushing of brambles announced the approach of horsemen, but not by the road he had come. "Here they are," he said, half aloud, and mounted on a neighbouring bank to get a better view of their approach. The foliage was so thick that he could not see them till they were close upon him, and then he knew that they were not those he expected. There were three riders instead of two, and the foremost was Hugh Desmond.

His first thought was that he had been dogged, that his host mistrusted him, and was acting the spy, but the genuine start of astonishment with which the latter reined up, checked the indignant remonstrance which was rising to his lips.

Desmond, who was some twenty yards in advance of his followers, waved them back, and said in a low voice that trembled with emotion—

“Was it well, Signor de Ribolini, to conceal from me that thou hadst sent for those who compass my life?”

“Hast met them?” cried Cosmo, thrown off his guard.

“No; it is good for them that I have not. 'Twas mine own servant who delivered thy letter, and turned them back on the road. And thou art here to meet them?”

“I am.”

“It was for this, then, that thou didst refuse my company. For *this*, the pretence of testing thy strength! Are all thy protestations of this order?”

“Good Master Desmond, bear with me,” said Cosmo. “Trust me, I pray thee; I am acting for the best. This is my affair, not thine.”

“Not mine!” cried Desmond, pale with suppressed anger. “Not mine, when it touches my life, the life of my son, and the

happiness of my beloved wife! God's truth! not my affair! and the assassins around my dwelling, and in league with one who has passed in it as my friend! We are three to one, Cosmo de Ribolini, now, but stood I here alone, this should show thee" (striking his sword hilt) "whose affair it is."

The rattle of steel brought the blood into the young Italian's face, but there was no time to quarrel. The others might appear at any moment.

"I swear to thee," he said, "by all that is most sacred, that I am thy true and loyal friend. If I have deceived thee in aught—have kept aught from thee, it was for thy good. I say again, this is my affair. For thy wife and children's sake leave it to me." Then he told him hurriedly why he had taken it upon himself, and what he proposed to do, concluding thus: "We have a wily adversary, good brother. He

will not risk a personal encounter. If he did, and was slain, what then? Thy danger is but postponed, not removed, so long as my father is of the same mind. Vincenti's death at thy hand would only add intensity to the vendetta. Thou wouldst not be safe, and I less able to help thee. Leave it to me to meet guile with guile, and if the time should come when the knot must be cut with steel, my sword shall be out with thine. As a noble, as a knight, as a MAN, Hugh Desmond, I pledge thee my faith that I am true to thee."

"If thou art false there is no truth—none. God help me!" said Desmond, pressing his outstretched hand. "I have a packet for thee."

"For me?"

"'Tis addressed to Signor Pietri—the name thou didst assume. There was a messenger for thee at Manchester."

“Is he with thee here?”

“No. ’Tis too long a tale to tell thee now. Suffice it for the present that the packet has fallen into my hands. You see the seals are intact. The bearer was from Martin Earle, of London.”

“Something for his nephew, doubtless,” replied Cosmo, carelessly, as he thrust the letter in his belt. “I pray thee leave me now, and in an hour I will tell thee all. From this hour there shall be no secrets between us.”

Another reassuring clasp of hands, and Hugh Desmond rode quietly away with his companions.

Twilight had now fairly set in, and yet no Vincenti at the rendezvous! He had named no particular spot in the wood. “Behind the hovel” were his words. Well, the wood was deeper than broad; he might be waiting farther on. Cosmo was in the act of mounting to make a reconnaissance,

when he thought of the letter, and half drew it from his belt. The outside cover was loose and a little torn. He could feel that there was a sealed enclosure. This satisfied him that Dick Earle must be the person most interested, or why had the goldsmith put on that outer sheet? He thrust it back again—he had something else to think of now—rode right through the wood, and had a good look around him in the open. He saw no one.

But some one saw him.

Vincenti Della Torre and his faithful henchman had also started early; and when they came to an eminence known as Three Tree Hill, from which a clear view of the wood and the road which led to it from Desmond's house could be obtained, he halted, saying—

“Rest awhile; we are before our time. When he comes in sight—if he comes at all to day—we can proceed.”

But Cosmo was already at the place of meeting when he spoke. So they waited, and saw an arrival, for which they were unprepared, from an opposite direction. Three horsemen passed them in the valley below, and they recognized them all—the smith who had been accused of stealing Marco's purse at Manchester; the messenger who had overtaken them with Dick Earle's letter; and Hugh Desmond himself, mounted on the very horse that messenger had ridden from the hovel! And they all three went into the wood and stayed there.

Presently Cosmo rode out into the open, looked about him, and returned.

"The wood is full of them," whispered Marco.

"'Tis an ambuscade!" muttered Vincenti, between his teeth.

His favourite word, "fooled," rose again to Marco's lips, but his companion looked so dangerous that he swallowed it. That

person was, in good sooth, livid with rage. All his former fears came back upon him in a rush, intensified and cleared of doubt. Cosmo was in league with the enemy. The messenger he, Vincenti, had trusted, the woman he had employed, were in the plot! The reflection that pig-headed Marco was right, after all, and they *had* been fooled, almost maddened him. They *were* fooled—all but trapped. How many more men might there not be in ambush? It was a trap—a palpable trap!—but the snare was set in sight of the bird, and the bird was cunning!

Four to two were odds which it did not suit Signor Vincenti Della Torre to face. They might be ten—twenty—to two for aught he could tell; for others might have entered the wood from the hovel side, where the road was low, and hidden by the trees.

It was some consolation, though a poor

one, to think that he had not fallen into the trap, and with this he rode back the way he had come. If he had only waited ten minutes more, he would have seen three of the supposed ambush wending their way quietly along the higher part of the road towards Desmond's dwelling.

"What now, kinsman mine?" asked Marco, with just a tinge of triumph in his tone.

He got no answer; Vincenti was plunged in thought.

"How was the moon last night?" he asked suddenly, after they had ridden about a mile.

"There was hardly any. I was awake with a raging tooth, and noted how dark it was."

"The darker the better," muttered the other.

Cosmo de Ribolini rode back into the

wood, wondering what had detained Vincenti.

“Perhaps he does not deem that I could go forth so soon,” he mused, “and will come to-morrow. Well, there is no need for further concealment with Desmond; I will come to-morrow. And yet, the twilight is long. He *may* be here to-day. I will wait yet a little longer.”

For the third time his mind went back to the packet. He would while away the time by seeing what it contained; there was light enough for that. He tore off the outer cover addressed to Signor Pietri, and found within a letter sealed with the family seal on black wax, and directed in the grandiloquent style of the period:—

“TO THE MOST NOBLE, THE MOST ILLUSTRIOUS AND MOST PUISSANT SIGNOR,
THE COMTE DE RIBOLINI.

“*With great haste.*”

“For my father!” he exclaimed aloud, so great was his astonishment.

Then that strange instinct, presentiment—second sight—whatever it may be, which sometimes tells us the contents of a letter (be they good news or bad), though it come in a strange hand, or at a time when we expect nothing—came upon him, and he knew that his father was dead before he broke the seals,

His father was dead—had died before he had left Italy. The news had followed him from place to place, and he had always missed it. If he had but waited two short hours at Venice, what comfort could he have breathed in Marcellina’s ear! what hours of painful doubt, of mental struggle, of self-reproach he might have been spared! His father was dead, and his last articulate words were—“*Stay my son—tell him—I forgive—mercy!*” In the valley of the shadow of Death the proud old

man had relented. Some gleam from the glorious face of HIM who had said, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," had struck his life's burden of hatred and revenge, and melted it into pity. He had passed away to seek for mercy, with mercy in his heart and forgiveness on his lips. There was a time when his son almost prayed for his death, when he thought he could receive the news without a tear. He wept, now, bitterly.

You who have watched, half stunned, in the silent house where the dear voice will be heard no more, or have lingered beside the fresh made grave, loth to go forth into the world—*alone* ! strong man though you be, you know some of the pangs he felt. But a few days ago you could charge yourself with no want of love, of duty ; but now a flood of remembrances bursts upon you amidst your tears. You recall many and many an act done which might have given

pain; many and many an act omitted which might have given pleasure: many and many a kindness not half requited; many and many an opportunity lost of paying a life-long debt of love. The best of sons cannot escape such self-accusation, and Cosmo de Ribolini was not to be counted as such. The dead Count had never loved him, or, at least, had never shown him his love. He had been harsh and cold always. Yesterday Cosmo would have told any one—more, he would have convinced himself—that their estrangement was his father's fault. Now he asked his own conscience if he might not have anticipated death in touching the soft spot in the old man's heart, if he by his own conduct had not contributed to make that heart so stern?

It was night before he roused himself from these bitter reflections. There was no remedy. The past was in his father's

grave, but the future was his own. He was the head of the house. The vendetta was doubly dead. Desmond might proclaim his wife's lineage from the housetops, if he pleased, and Marcellina—sweet, patient Marcellina—would be a Countess! He would bring her to England, until the gossips were done with what would be called his *mésalliance*, and how happy they would be all together!

Cosmo gave the letter from Mantua to Desmond to read, and he broke the news to Sweetheart, who was not unprepared for it. Her brother had told her that their father's life hung on a thread, and she had had many a cry about him with the children. With the children! Ah me! Here again the whirligig of Time brings round our punishment. In our young days we hold parents to be a respectable sort of people, useful and lovable in many ways, but, as a rule, kill-joys, wet blankets, old-

time folks, by no means up to the period which we illuminate. But when we have children of our own, we understand what it may be to thwart and disobey. Sweet-heart hugged little Mary to her bosom, and prayed that *she* might never earn a parent's curse. She cried with the children again over the news of poor grandpapa's death. They had never heard of grandpapa, and wondered when she sobbed, "He forgave me! he forgave me at last, my darlings! but, oh, if he had only lived to tell me so!"

That night the inevitable explanation with Dick Earle was made. Poor Dick had been in a maze for the last three days, and when Tom Stevens came back he spoke his mind roundly. He was no longer of any use; he saw that he was in the way. Master Desmond had a servant who could guide the Signor to Manchester. The sooner he (Dick) went back to his busi-

ness the better. But he was too good a fellow to be treated thus, so Cosmo told him all, in the presence of Desmond and his wife. In a few days they would all go to London together.

They were seated in a room at the side of the house. The night was oppressively hot, so all the windows (or rather the shutters) were open, and they were grouped near them to get the cool.

Now Cosmo's story—as matters stood—could be told in a few words; but to make his conduct clear to Dick, the now straight skein had to be tangled and disentangled again. This took some time, especially as the narrator desired, in self-defence, to show that he detested the mission on which he had started, and thought that he should never have the heart to carry it out even before he knew that Desmond was its proposed victim. He was very emphatic in impressing this

upon Dick, and, just as he had concluded this topic, he was interrupted by a cry from Sweetheart.

“Listen !” she cried. “What was that moving amongst the shrubs ?”

“A rabbit,” Desmond replied. “The place is overrun by them.”

“They do come out on moonlight nights,” she said ; “but I never have seen them when it is quite dark.”

There was a general laugh at the “bull,” but Sweetheart persisted it was not a rabbit.

“To satisfy thee, I will go and see if any one be about, although I heard naught,” said her husband, rising.

“No, no, no !” she exclaimed, catching his arm, “you shall not go.”

“Why, Sweetheart, what ails thee ?”

“I know not—I—perchance it was fancy. Oh, do not leave me.”

“I will tell thee what ails thee. Thou

art overwrought, mine own. The excitement of the past days has made thee nervous. But go to thy bed."

"Not till you come. Let me stay with thee?" she pleaded, drawing closer to his side, and clasping his hand.

"Thou art cold—trembling," he said, tenderly.

"'Tis nothing! 'twill pass. Dear Cosmo, forgive me; I *am* nervous, and I know not why. Do not notice me."

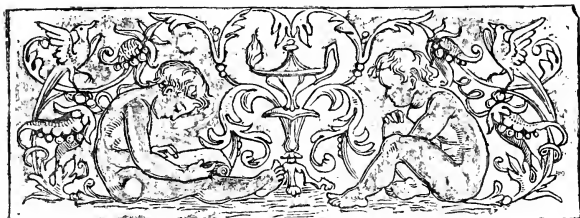
Desmond threw his arm around her, and signed to Cosmo to proceed.

He took up the thread at the point where he received Vincenti's message; told how he intended to hood-wink that worthy, if he had met him at their rendezvous, and read the letter reporting his father's death, and the last words he had spoken. "So now," he said, refolding it, "the vendetta is doubly at an end, first, because, as head of the house, I would not pursue it, and

next, because it is plain, from my father's last words, that——”

“There again!” shrieked Sweetheart, starting up. Desmond rose, too, and folded her quivering form to his breast. He stood with his back to the open casement, she fronting it, with her face hidden on his shoulder. His soothing words and tender caresses made her lift her eyes to his—her eloquent, loving eyes! But as they rose, horror filled them! She dashed him aside, and sprang between where he had stood and the window, just as the black night was scored with a flash of flame. A loud report followed, and the Sweetheart beat its last.

Hugh Desmond's shield was the tender bosom of his wife!



CHAPTER XIII.

A BLACK NIGHT.

FOR the better elucidation of what had passed at Hugh Desmond's Staffordshire house, and of that which has yet to happen there, some description of it and its surroundings is necessary.

The house was a long, low structure, with a wing at each extremity, forming almost three sides of a square. It was in a room of one of these wings where Cosmo told his story, and Sweetheart fell, pierced by the charge intended for her husband.

On this same side was a wood of some four or five acres, and which had once extended up to the walls ; but Desmond had about two hundred yards of it cut down, so as to give more light and air and less damp to his dwelling, and made a path, which he bordered with evergreens, to flank each wing. A low stone wall separated the "home close" from the road in front and from the open country at the right side ; the wood bounded it on the left. At the back were the stables and some unused farm buildings, which had fallen into decay.

Although Marco, in his beggarman's disguise, did not get beyond the outer gate, he made a map in his mind of the premises. He was sent to reconnoitre, and soon saw his way. He would go down the wood, creep across the cut margin where it was narrowest, gain the laurel hedge, and there watch. The chance which brought Sweet-

heart out, and led her to take pity on his well-feigned distress, rendered these manœuvres unnecessary, for that day at least. They came in afterwards.

As the spy and his chief returned from that other wood, where the appearance of Desmond and Cosmo de Ribolini together revived Vincenti's suspicions, you may remember that he asked how the moon was ; and being told that there was hardly any on the previous night, replied, "*The darker the better.*" He had made up his mind to go to the house, see upon what terms Cosmo was there, and act accordingly. He imparted this resolve to Marco, and was told how it could be carried out.

They entered the wood from the far side, fastened their horses to trees out of hearing, crept across the cut margin where it was narrowest, gained the laurel hedge, and watched. Hearing voices, they crept on to within four yards of the open case-

ments of the room where Cosmo told his story, and they listened.

Carefully as they moved, they made some slight stir amongst the branches, and this was what had startled Sweetheart. The night was still, and every word that the young Italian uttered reached them. When, in reply to his wife's cry that there was something moving amongst the shrubs, Desmond proposed to go out and see if any one was about, Vincenti set his teeth and loosened his dagger in its sheath. He dared not light the match of his pistol *then*.

It was no part of his plan to execute his hate and vengeance then and there. He came to satisfy himself respecting Cosmo, and he was satisfied. He had delayed the death of Desmond in order that a nearer representative of the house he had outraged should be present to confirm its sentence—and he heard that very one reprieve

it! He heard him tell how he had hoodwinked and outwitted him! He heard him read the letter which showed that he was now the head of the family, and his will its law. He learned what that will would be—Desmond would be protected! Desmond was loved by the woman he had stolen from him! Desmond would be happy!

Rage filled his heart, and banished all thought of prudence. Desmond should die! He stole back into the wood, struck a light with flint and steel carried for the purpose, lit the match of his pistol, and, maddened at the sight of the caresses with which his enemy sought to calm Sweetheart's fears, re-aroused by his returning steps, he levelled the weapon at his breast.

Poor Sweetheart saw the glowing match, and the evil face which it disclosed. In an instant, before he could recall the motion of finger upon trigger, she threw her hus-

band aside, took his place, and died for him !

When she fell, her brother and Dick Earle thought that she had only fainted, frightened by the shot fired in the garden. Their ears had not been accustomed to the horrid hiss and thud of lead as Desmond's were. He knew that she was struck when she sank in his arms.

There was a cruel red tear on one dear soft cheek that rested on his breast, a purple spot on her delicate throat ; and when he laid his hand upon her heart, and found that it beat not, there came away a crimson stain upon his palm. The wall behind was scored with slugs which had missed their mark ; but—ah, me !—enough had gone true !

He knew that she was dead—shot through the heart ! That no human skill could save her ; that she was lost to him, in the flower of her gentle life, for ever. And

yet he could do nothing—say nothing, but try to staunch the blood which flowed from her most trivial wound, with a pitiful, “Oh, look! her pretty face! her pretty face!”

“God of mercies! Is she struck?” cried Cosmo.

He lifted his hand, and showed the cruel red spot upon it.

“But not to death? Oh, say she may recover!”

Desmond laid her face upon his bosom and kissed it.

“She is dead,” he said, looking up with tearless eyes, and a calmness which terrified his hearer. “Quite dead!”

The words were scarcely uttered, when there arose from the garden a cry of “Murder! help!” This aroused all but Desmond from the stupor which had held them. Snatching up the nearest weapons, Cosmo and Dick Earle sprang from the window,

and ran in the direction whence the sound proceeded.

Tom Stevens and Gregory, the smith, had struck up a warm friendship, and the former was doing the honours of the kitchen when the shot was fired. On their ride back from the old mill Desmond had told them that his life was threatened, that his wife and children were in danger, and so accounted, without entering into details, for having sent for Gregory. The two were discussing this over their ale, and wondering who could have a grudge against so good a man, when they heard the report of fire-arms. In an instant they were on their way to the house to see what had happened, but as they crossed the yard they perceived two dark forms gliding along under cover of the evergreens., and making for the road. They gave chase, and the moment they were noticed, the fugitives separated, the one turning back into the

wood, the other taking to the open meadow. This was a tall active man, and Tom (whom chance had selected as his pursuer) would have been easily outrun if accident had not helped him. The tall man slipped over a stump, fell, and before he could rise again, Tom seized him by the throat, shouting, "Murder! help!"

He had no immediate reason to use the first word; he did not know that murder had been done, but there quickly came good cause to repeat his cry, for as they rolled, struggling on the ground, Marco drew his knife, and stabbed him twice in the back. At each blow he cried anew, "Murder! help!" and tightened his grasp upon the assassin's throat, holding on with the tenacity of a bull-dog, and the courage of a hero. Cosmo and Dick Earle came up only just in time. The knife was raised for the third time, and now might and strength had prevailed. The man was

uppermost, and the brave boy's side unprotected against the stroke. Cosmo seized his wrist, wrenched the dagger from him, and with its pomel dealt him such a buffet on the head as laid him senseless for the next twenty minutes.

"Good lad! brave lad!" said Cosmo. "We have one of them safe; now bind him, in case he should recover, whilst we follow the other."

But poor, faithful Tom, had done all he could that day. He tried hard to rise, but fainted with pain and loss of blood. At the same moment they were joined by Gregory, who reported that he had lost all trace of the other man in the wood, where, however, he had found two horses saddled and bridled (evidently those upon which the murderers had come), tethered there whilst they were at their deadly work.

"Secure the horses at once," said ready Dick, "and so cut off his chance of flight.

On foot, as he is, we shall have him yet. Let us carry this poor boy to the house, and then scour the country on his own steeds. He cannot be far off."

"Quick, then," Cosmo replied. "And as for thee" (turning towards where Marco lay)—"as there is no time to bind thee, I will make sure another way." But Dick interposed.

"No, no! Would you slay a stunned man? No, villain as he is, that were a crime. Leave him to me. As soon as we have carried in the boy, I will return with cords and secure him."

They found Hugh Desmond as they had left him, on the floor of his now desolate home, with Sweetheart's head upon his breast. The same fixed look was on his face, the same dull light in his tearless eyes. Grief had frozen up even its own expression. When they told him that he must go and dress Tom Stevens' wounds,

he said, "Yes, yes, presently ; but do not disturb her. Bring me a pillow."

"May we not carry her to her bed?" whispered Cosmo.

"As you will."

They led him away like a man in a trance, but the sight of his servant's wounds stung his stunned senses into life.

"Who did this?" he cried, fiercely.
"Who has stabbed my servant?"

"I pray thee ask no questions now," Cosmo pleaded, "but bind up his hurts. See how they bleed."

He obeyed mechanically, but his skilful hands could not forget their office. The bleeding was staunched, and Tom revived. His first words were, "Have you got him?"

"Safe," replied Cosmo, "Even now Master Earle is binding him."

"And the other?"

"Escaped for the present ; but we have his horses, and——"

At the word "escaped," Hugh Desmond uttered a cry fearful to hear. Until now the agony caused by Sweetheart's death had crushed down all thought about her destroyers. It came upon him with a crash.

"Who has escaped?" he cried. "Not Vincenti! Tell me it is not Vincenti if ye would not drive me mad! Which man is bound?"

"The tall one; but it might have been he who fired."

"The instrument—the base, cruel instrument, if it were; but not the instigator," Desmond moaned. "Why stand ye here when he is gone? To horse! to horse! and chase. But," he added in a calmer tone, "let no one harm him; leave him to me. Stay him, hold him, if fate wills that any of ye encounter him; but, an' ye love me, take not his life! Leave him to me."

Cosmo and Desmond each saddled his own horse. Earle and Gregory, to save time, mounted those which the latter had found in the wood. There were thus two steeds left behind in the stable. No one thought of locking the door; no one remembered that the children were left alone and unprotected.

The report of the shot which made them motherless awoke the poor little things. They heard the shouts in the wood, the trampling of horses in the yard, heavy footsteps in the adjoining room, and wondered what it all could mean. They wondered more than all why mamma did not come to quiet their fears. If a storm arose at night, if a door slammed, if they awoke frightened by a dream—the next thing they knew was that her loving arms were round them, and that her soft voice was whispering between her kisses—"It is nothing; be not afraid, my darlings!"

Why did she not come and kiss and comfort them now? They dare not rise in the dark, but sat up in their little bed, clutching each other, crying silently, too frightened to call out, and asking in forlorn whispers—"Oh! will dear mamma *never* come?" Never, poor little hearts! never again! The loving arms are cold—the soft voice hushed for ever!

Then the house became silent again, and their fears subsided. The very fact that dear mamma did not come consoled them after a while; "For," reasoned little Maria, "she would be sure to come if she thought we were frightened."

"Besides," said her brother, "papa's here now; so there's nothing to be frightened at."

He was not there. Besides themselves there was no living creature in the house save Tom Stevens, and he could not move hand or foot to help them. The doors

stood open—left so in their hurry and excitement when Desmond and his companions rode away after the fugitive assassin. All was dark and silent.

Placing Cosmo de Ribolini, Dick Earle, and Gregory on the outskirts of the wood, Desmond entered it on foot, and searched as thoroughly as the darkness allowed. There was no one to be found, and, except for a very short distance, no traces of the man they sought.

“He doubled, and made for the road,” said Desmond. “When Gregory cut him off from the horses we will all gallop three miles in different directions, and then return slowly in circles towards the house. Earle, will you ride towards Stafford? Gregory, hie thee along the road to the right; I will take the open country this way; and you, Signor Cosmo, the opposite direction. Oh, God! for half an hour of

daylight! Spare not your horses! Gallop out so as to head him! and then search every gully and break on either hand! Away my friends—away! An' ye see him, shout—shout, and fire your pistols! Take him alive!—kill him only in the last extremity! He must not escape. Away!"

They understood, and obeyed him as one man. East, west, north, and south they sped. So well was the plan executed, that before the lapse of one hour, three out of the four had met and parted again, narrowing the circle. All went well at first. Just as day had begun to break, Earle and Desmond heard the report of firearms, followed by a shout from Gregory. They made a dash for the spot (the heath where Cosmo had fallen), and found, after a long chase in the adjoining wood, that it was only the hoveller, whom the smith had sighted in the half light and mistaken for their quarry. The poor wretch was snaring

rabbits; and finding himself ridden after and (as he supposed) shot at, took to his heels, dived into the thickest part of the copse, and gave his pursuers a good hour's work before they found out their mistake. It was a bitter disappointment. Not only had it delayed their search at a most inopportune time, but it had left two sides of the ground open for the escape of the real fugitive.

Having thus diverted their quest, it was only fair that the hoveller should be pressed into its service. He was stationed on the hill from which Vincenti de la Torre had obtained such a good view of the surrounding country, with orders to keep a strict watch, and shout as loud as his lungs would let him if he saw any one but the hunters moving.

It was now broad daylight, and they had been six hours on horseback. They started convinced that the assassin of Sweetheart

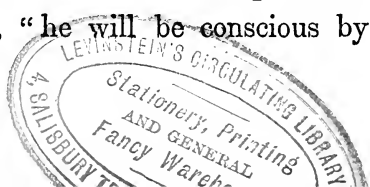
could not possibly escape them. They now, one and all, began to wonder how they had ever expected to catch him.

How often this will happen ! We start with a sense of the hopelessness of our task, and obstacle after obstacle melts away as we approach it. We begin full of confidence, and difficulty after difficulty rises to baulk us !

So it was with Desmond and his friends. The farther they rode, the closer they searched, the more hopeless did their efforts appear. What could four men do in such a country as that, all hill and valley on three sides, and a wide, rolling heath on the other, full of holes and fern-brakes, in which a dozen men could hide even in daylight ? And this night was black as Erebus. Only one of them knew the lay of the land, and he made a great mistake when he chose the open country. He did so because on his good "Hafid" he

was the best mounted. He did not consider that the others might lose themselves in wood and thicket, and pass over the same ground without knowing it. All went right at first, but in a short time the well-laid plan became deranged. Cosmo mistook his direction, and rode away from the house ; Gregory got lost in a wood ; Earle followed the same line which Desmond had taken ; and, as we have already seen, the last three all packed together at daylight. They had been six hours in the saddle, and had not spared their horses. Wearied men and jaded steeds turned back to the Grange, where they found that a further crime had been committed.

Dick Earle was the first to enter its gates, and remembering the position in which he had left the man Marco, went straight to the spot. "If that blow on the head has not settled him for good and all," he mused, "he will be conscious by

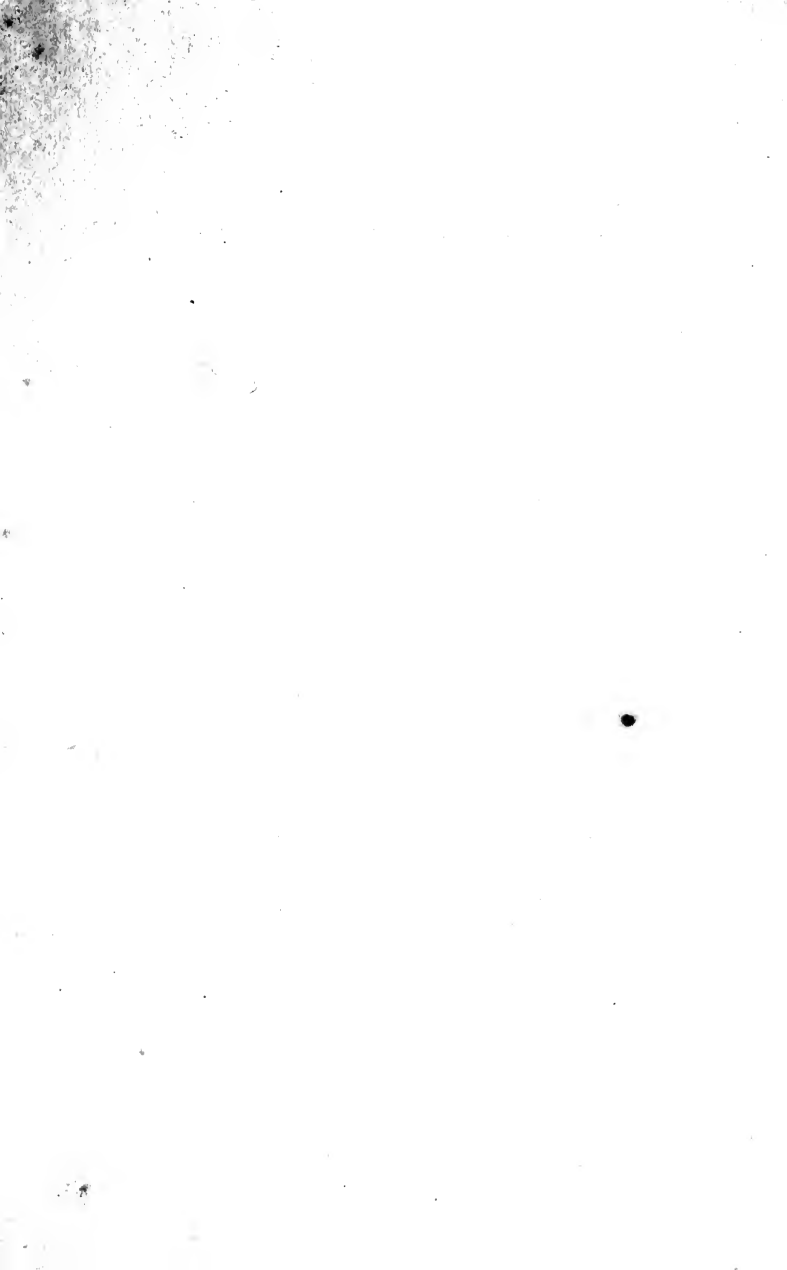


this time." To his amazement neither man nor body was there! Had he slipped the ropes? No, but some one had cut them. There they lay in a dozen fragments—clean slashed through all their folds. He had scarcely realized all this, when there arose a piercing cry from the house.

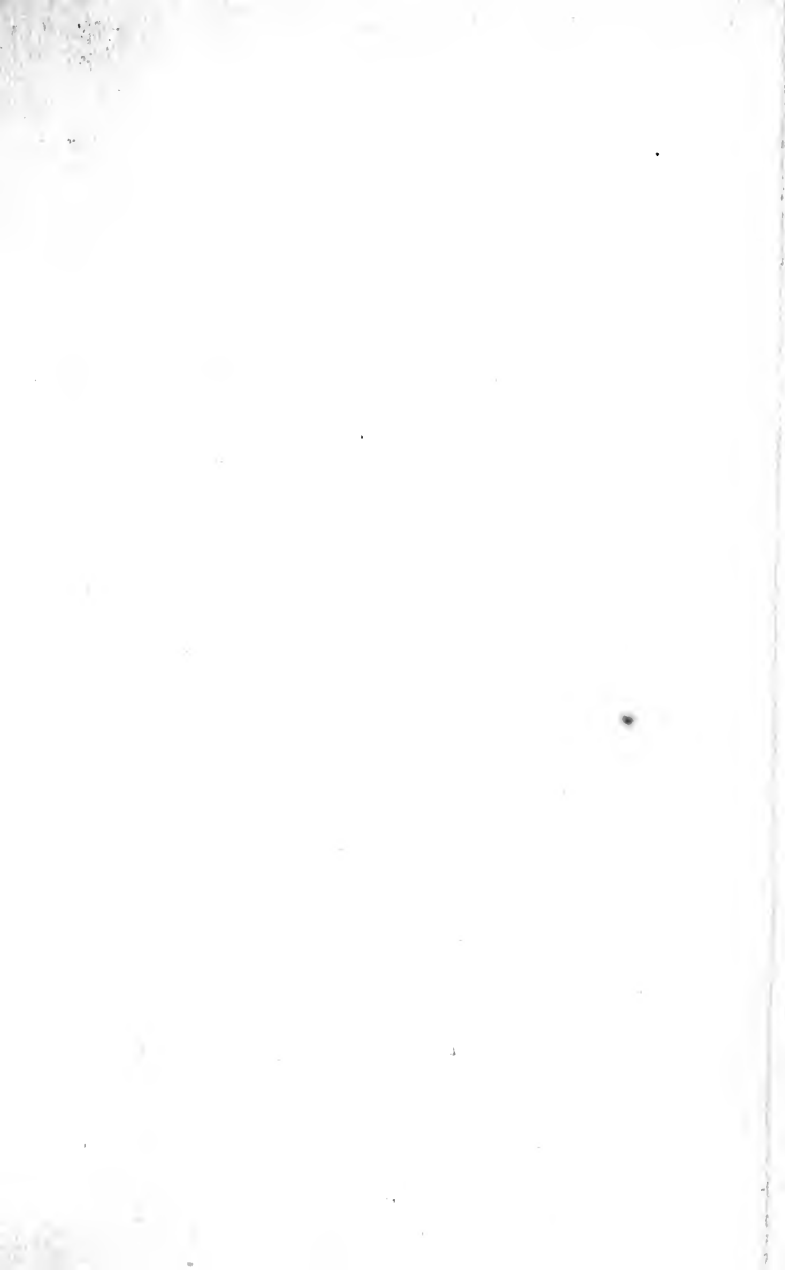
Desmond had returned. Asleep beside her mother's corpse he found his girl—the boy was gone!

So also were the two fresh horses.

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